

# **The Subaltern Public Sphere of Hong Kong Youth**

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## **Abstract**

Despite that Hong Kong youth has always been molded with a passive image in social and political participation, we could find their participation in marches and discussions over public affairs in their daily lives. Based on this contradicting phenomenon, this study examined the daily political discourses of Hong Kong youth under the framework of subaltern public sphere theory. The data were collected by in-depth interviews and complemented by a secondary analysis of a questionnaire survey. The findings suggested an existence of open and free political discussions among Hong Kong youth, even though they are of insignificant amount. They are mostly conducted in the form of face-to-face interaction. The findings also identified Hong Kong youth's social and political discussions contain some characteristics of a subaltern public sphere - (1) a variety of contents including the social and political affairs; (2) a deliberative and rational discourse. Yet it is too early to say these discussions composed a subaltern public sphere of Hong Kong youth, the potential for the development of a subaltern public sphere is recognized. We should encourage the development of Hong Kong youth's subaltern public sphere and the dialogues between the subaltern and dominant public sphere as well. Because this could enrich the democratic potentials of Hong Kong youth who will become elites and professionals in the dominant public sphere in the future. This could finally promote the health of the public sphere in Hong Kong.

## 摘要

香港的青少年常常被認為是不關心政治的一群，但是他們涉及公共事務的足跡其實不難尋獲。基於這個矛盾的論述，本論文嘗試以次公共領域理論去探討香港青少年“次公共領域”的存在可能，從而解釋香港青少年不關心政治這一矛盾的論述。論文的數據來自深入訪談及一問卷調查的二手分析。結果顯示青少年雖然有參與公共及政治事務的討論，但討論的頻率偏低。他們的討論大多以面對面 (face-to-face) 的溝通模式進行並且能符合討論必須是“深思熟慮” (deliberation) 的標準，而且大多數是以學校作為進行的場景。由此反映，香港青少年的議政空間擁有某些“次公共領域”的特點。“次公共領域”為青少年提供了一個安全的話語空間，並讓群組裏的參與者利用此空間融會個人興趣及產生身份認同的果效，從而加強“次公共領域”的流動性。為可以加強香港的民主發展，我們應該鼓勵“主公共領域”與“次公共領域”的對話；同時，“次公共領域”的存在亦應該被肯定及強化，因為對青少年進行民主意識的訓練最終會讓他們成長後在參與“主公共領域”的過程中，進一步推動香港的民主發展。



# **Acknowledgement**

**To those who make me whole**

**For**

**Prof. Anthony Fung, my supervisor,**

**Prof. Clement So,**

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**My family, and**

**.....myself.**

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

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Over the decades of colonial rule by the British government, Hong Kong's distinctive political culture had significant implications on the political behavior of its people and the configuration of the political environment in Hong Kong. Hong Kong people have been extensively recognized as an apolitical group. But are the youth of Hong Kong, being part of this "Hong Kong people", just the same as the proclaimed apolitical group? The role of young people in a city is of crucial importance to its future development. If we are pursuing a democratic Hong Kong city, then it is imperative to examine how much the youth of Hong Kong are ready to take part in its social and political affairs.

### **Political versus Apolitical Youth**

According to the latest documentation, the number of young people participating in the social and political affairs of Hong Kong has been on the rise in recent years.<sup>1</sup> We can easily locate the evidence of their participation in marches or demonstrations, and their voices are sometimes to be heard in open debate. From these figures, it seemed to us that some of Hong Kong's young people are likely to be involved in social and political affairs, although their role may not be of comparable effectiveness as that of adults.

Nevertheless, as already mentioned, young people in Hong Kong used to be perceived as politically apathetic.<sup>2</sup> The noises from society, schools and all the other social institutions used to call for reinforcing our youth's social and political awareness,

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<sup>1</sup> According to "A Study on the Participation of Hong Kong Youth in Legislative Council Elections", Youth Study Series No.22 September 2000, The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, the Hong Kong government lowered the voting age to 18 in 1994, and youth participation in electoral affairs began to attract a great deal of attention.

<sup>2</sup> Comparative Youth Study, No.4 December 1994, The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups



aiming at encouraging it to participate in social and political affairs. They considered the young people of Hong Kong to be nothing more than an apathetic group, like the young people of many other western societies.

Although our young people are eagerly being asked to act positively in matters concerning society (Chung, 1994; Yue, 2001), their opinions are not often valued. For instance, Mrs. Fanny Law, Permanent Secretary for the Education and Manpower Bureau, has criticized students as “the least qualified group to judge government officials and comment on political issues”.<sup>3</sup> Being a chief government officer for the Education and Manpower Bureau, Mrs. Law would be assumed to be one of the best officers for mobilizing participation of the youth of Hong Kong on social and political issues. However, her public speech is a kind of discouragement from any such purpose. This just reflects that the spaces for the youth of Hong Kong to have open and free discussions about social and political matters are very limited, if not non-existent. This might also hint to us that the mainstream public sphere is not so ready for the involvement of its young people.

After all, is the problem here the youth of Hong Kong’s disinterest in social and political affairs, or is it the discouraging attitude of society that causes them to be called an “apolitical group”? Is it true that young people in Hong Kong are not concerned with social and political issues at all? Or is it because the devaluation of their opinions or participation? Yet the recent active groups of young people devoted to social and political issues have shown us to a certain extent they are not an apolitical group towards these issues. There are young Hong Kong people who are interested in social

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<sup>3</sup> See “Law apology not enough, say students”, The Standard, April 13, 2004.

and political affairs.

### **Colonial Background of Hong Kong**

The distinctive political environment in colonial Hong Kong shaped the political behavior of the people. During the colonial period, the British Hong Kong government adopted a policy of political discouragement, but gave an appreciative degree of freedom to the Hong Kong people. This was freedom in the sense of high levels of freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of assembly.<sup>4</sup> However, it was never a democracy. The public's conception of democracy is full of ambiguities. In the light of Hong Kong's politically-dependent status as a colony and the incomplete concept of democracy they possess, Hong Kong people do not show that much enthusiasm for social and political participation.

By the same token, young people educated by a politically discouraging government are likely to be a group that has an incomplete concept of democracy and a lack of desire for social and political participation. Because we know this, the youth group is one of the social classes that need plenty of resources for their comprehensive growth to adulthood. If resources and encouragement are not given, then they are not likely to be developed into a politically enthusiastic group.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of the ideas introduced by the British Hong Kong government - freedom of speech, freedom of press and freedom of assembly - meant that Hong Kong people began to learn more about democracy and started to make their voice heard by the government. Ever since 1984, poll data and electoral behavior showed that the public became increasingly proactive in politics (Fung, 1998). This

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<sup>4</sup> Article 27 of the Basic Law of The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of The People's Republic of China.



politically inclined public is mainly composed of the middle classes or the rich and professionals or the elites (Fung, 1998). If we presumed that political reform provides a fertile environment for the growth of a limited understanding of democracy and an aspiration for it, then we might suggest this is an appropriate time to study the political participation of the youth of Hong Kong, at a time 20 years later than the activation of adults.

### **Political Aspirations of Hong Kong Youth**

Hong Kong people were awoken to political participation 20 years ago, but what is the scenario like for the youth of Hong Kong today? And, what are the responses of the youth of Hong Kong to some social and political issues, and their democratic values as well?

### **Regime Transition in Hong Kong**

Hong Kong was transferred from a British colony to a Special Administration Region under Chinese rule in 1997. This sovereignty reversion has provided a chance for Hong Kong people from every stratum to talk about politics, from adult to youth, from bourgeois to grass-roots. The study of identity has also become a popular research agenda item in Hong Kong (Leung, 1997). One survey particularly concerned with the attitude of Hong Kong's young people towards this issue shows that 60 per cent of young people have learnt more about China since the handover. Slightly more than 60 per cent of young people also found that their Chinese (but not Hongkonger) sense of identity had increased. Another 46 per cent of young people's sense of national consciousness had also increased.<sup>5</sup> These data give us a general picture that the intention of Hong Kong's young people to act over matters of nationality is quite strong,

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<sup>5</sup> See "Youth's Retrospection On The Year Since The Handover", Youth Poll Series No.55, 6.1998.

and is not only limited to personal stuff.

### Maladministration of Government Perceived by Public

Hong Kong has suffered from serious adversities since the handover to China in 1997. The public perceived the social problems and the unsuccessful reforms of economics and politics as maladministration by the HKSAR Government. At the same time, young people's evaluation of the HKSAR Government and the Chief Executive was also not encouraging. A survey indicated that about 40% of young people could not identify any satisfactory areas in the Government's performance. Their grading for the Chief Executive and the main government officials is generally lower than 40 marks out of a possible 100.<sup>6</sup> Their discontent with the government and officials also suggested that the youth group is able to make criticisms and evaluations about social and political affairs.

### Potential Voting Behavior

Voting is probably the most agreed-upon means of achieving democracy. If we look at the intention to vote amongst Hong Kong's young people, then we can know the degree of democracy that they aim for. Cheung & Leung (1999) discovered significant positive effects on students' voting intentions from their political awareness, support for direct elections, support for lowering the voting age, and participation in various organizations. However, according to studies by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG) on Hong Kong young people's intention to vote in the 1991 Legislative Council election and in 1994, there was a slight drop of percentage in 1994.<sup>7</sup> Based on these

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<sup>6</sup> See "Youth's Retrospection On The Year Since The Handover", Youth Poll Series No.55, June 1998, The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.

<sup>7</sup> See "A Study on the Participation of Hong Kong Youth in Legislative Council Elections", Youth Study Series No.22, September 2000. The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.



observations, we might conclude that young people who aspire for democracy do not necessarily participate with higher voter registration or voting rates. Or as Cheung & Leung (1999) concluded, “Hong Kong young people generally have a limited and narrow civic awareness, strong concern for social affairs, and high praise for democratic values, even though their political participation might be weak.”

#### Attitude & Validity Check on Social & Political Affairs

With reference to the studies by HKFYG, some encouraging data indicated that 56 per cent of young people did not agree that students should concentrate more on their studies and think less about society’s affairs.<sup>8</sup> In addition, 53 per cent of young people agreed that students should get involved in political activities, with about 30 per cent having a contrary view. As regards paying attention to social and political affairs, one survey found that when young people were asked “What is the major negative change in Hong Kong since the transfer of sovereignty?”, 46% per cent cited economic regressions.<sup>9</sup> Another 11% per cent noticed an increase in unemployment and social problems.

The youth of Hong Kong, just like youth in the rest of the world, were observed to be apolitical and only mildly interested in participating in social and political affairs. Debates about young people’s relationship with politics have often reached pessimistic conclusions. Evidence about the declining levels of their political knowledge and

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<sup>8</sup> See “Topic 1: Individual and Society”, Youth Study Series, April 1994, The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.

<sup>9</sup> See “Youth’s Retrospection On The Year Since The Handover”, Youth Poll Series No.55, June 1998, The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.

political participation typically lead to a view of young people as only ignorant, apathetic and cynical. Such assertions are frequently part of a broader lament for the apparent decline of democracy, which has become increasingly prominent in western societies in recent years (Putnam, 2000). Nevertheless, the young people's responses suggested that they were indeed alert to Hong Kong's public affairs, as their views greatly matched the existing socio-economic situations.<sup>10</sup>

### **Youth Studies in Political Participation**

There are several social organizations that conduct pertinent studies and surveys of the youth of Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG) conducts a survey regarding youth values in Hong Kong every year. The Youth of Hong Kong Development Council also publishes their report on the youth development index from time to time. The youth agenda has been one of the important perspectives of communication research in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, it is mostly done from the media effect perspective. For example, the impact on young people of television programs or TV commercials by Cheung & Chan (1996); their consumption behavior with the effect of media; or the latest internet studies.

There is also another stream of studies concerning the civil awareness of young people in Hong Kong. This stream aims at investigating the degree of devotion amongst young people to social and political affairs, as well as their values on citizenship. Cheung & Leung (1995) studied the democratic predispositions among college students in Hong Kong; Yeung (1998) looked into the prospects of youth political culture in Hong Kong and Fung & Erni (2002) explored the dislocation of political culture in Hong Kong's

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<sup>10</sup> See "The Expectation of Youth on Government Policy and Policy Makers", Youth Poll Series No.82, October 2000. The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.



youth culture.

These studies, however, are mostly done in descriptive bases, if not with a coherent theoretical framework. In light of this, this study tries to establish a relatively comprehensive theoretical framework on top of the simple examination of lines of thought on the basis of survey data.

### **Research Questions**

Regarding the contradiction occurring between the image being moulded of passive political participation by the youth of Hong Kong and the fact shown by survey data that they are actually socially and politically non-passive, this paper tried to answer the following research questions:

1. Are the youth of Hong Kong a socially and politically passive group? Have they participated in any forms of social and political activities? Specifically, are they keen to discuss social and political affairs?

In order to establish whether the youth of Hong Kong are actually politically interested or disinterested, we will first examine whether they participate in any political activities in their daily lives. Such participation can take many different forms. What we are going to look at are the open or free discussions about social and political issues among them. “Open” and “free” political discussions here refer to the rights that young people have to discuss and express their views about any public affairs that concern them, without any forms of interference, especially from the government. The discussions should be on a great variety of issues. They can enter or leave the discussions whenever they want to. Since they have equal rights to enter the discussions, they are not subject to any

prerequisites about their social status.

The reason for choosing social and political discussions as means of social and political participation is supported by Habermas's public sphere theory. Public sphere theory defines the gathering of people at public places to discuss social and political affairs as an active sense in participating social and political affairs. Habermas also identified norms for these discussions. In light of this, we are able to investigate Hong Kong youth's orientation in participating social and political affairs through social and political discussions.

As already mentioned, political discussions or meetings are considered to be a game for small groups of elites or professionals. We very often neglect that actually there are many discussion groups in our society, they can be groups of workers, groups of housewives, or even groups of young people. Therefore, we will try to investigate the possible existence of these open and free political discussions among the youth of Hong Kong. In addition, we will try to examine what forms these discussions take. Are they conducted by traditional means of face-to-face interaction, or do they exist in other forms?

2. What is/are the characteristic(s) of the youth of Hong Kong's social and political discussions? Are these discussions likely to generate a subaltern public sphere in Hong Kong?

By studying their young people's possible social and political discussions, we try to identify the characteristics that such discussions have. Habermas has defined the public sphere as a "realm in which individuals gather to participate in open discussion"



(Habermas, 1989). It has a number of characteristics. First of all, this is a “space” independent from the state and where a variety of opinions concerning public affairs are held. It is free from the interference of government, which does not have any centralized power controlling or censoring speech in the discussion. Secondly, everyone has access to the discourse. Anyone can express their opinions in this “space”, regardless of their social status.

Base on Habermas’ presumptions, theorists who have given powerful critiques to public sphere theory generated the notion of subaltern public sphere theory. This theory takes over some basic principles of the Habermasian unitary public sphere. A subaltern public sphere is still a space for people to discuss a variety of opinions over public issues and it also requires absolute independence from the state. Nevertheless, subaltern public sphere theorists think that the unitary public sphere actually exists in the form of a dominant public sphere and a subaltern public sphere. These spheres are differentiated by different social, economic, political and cultural statuses. The subaltern public spheres interact with each other as well as with the dominant sphere. If they are functioning well with their principles, they can finally influence the wider public, change the state policy and promote the health of the public sphere. A more detailed account of the notion of subaltern public sphere and public sphere will be given in Chapter 2. The notion of subaltern public sphere is used as the theoretical framework in this study. Using the subaltern public sphere instead of Habermas’ one is because of its sensitiveness towards the social difference.

### **Significance of the Study**

While we discovered that the public sphere in Hong Kong is still limited in a sense, not to mention that the public sphere for our youth is even more underdeveloped. Reasons

suggested for this underdevelopment were (1) disinterest in social and political affairs, or (2) the physical conditions do not facilitate its existence.

However, prior to this “powerlessness”, we did record the existence of certain forms of public sphere for the youth of Hong Kong, though more often we found that these spheres grow outside the structures of traditional organizations. For instance, the Hong Kong Cultural Center has long been identified as a place of assembly for the youth. Young people are used to gathering there on festive occasions, like Christmas, New Year’s Eve, or for their “meaningful moments” like the night before the announcement of the results of the Hong Kong Examination of Education (HKCEE) or the Hong Kong A-Level Examination (HKAL). The youth are self-motivated to be there and are not drawn by any organizational activities. The gathering might have no more clearer objective than a chitchat purpose. However, this ability to spontaneously self-construct spheres among the youth of Hong Kong still hinted to us that our youth are capable of constructing their own “sphere” out of the mainstream, elite and professional one.

These casual gatherings without rational activities are commonly known as youth sub-culture. They represent a large quantity of social science research. The mature development of the youth of Hong Kong’s sub-culture delivered a message to us that the youth of Hong Kong itself supports a self-constructed sphere. What distinguishes the sub-culture of the youth of Hong Kong from the subaltern public sphere is its rational nature. Sub-culture is a culture formed amongst young people with similar interests and in which they develop their interests as a kind of culture. For the subaltern public sphere, it’s a “space” that requires rational and deliberative discourse, specifically for social and political affairs.



By using the theory of subaltern public spheres as the theoretical framework, this study tries to examine *if a subaltern public sphere is about to exist among the youth of Hong Kong – a place where they can express their views and conduct open and free political and discussions*. But what is the underlying meaning of the existence of a subaltern public sphere for the youth of Hong Kong? Colonial rule by the British introduced sets of westernized liberal values and beliefs about human society. Hong Kong people therefore enjoy free access to discourse so they can hold a variety of opinions concerning public affairs and discuss them free from government's interference or censorship. If it is true that Hong Kong people do process their public sphere, then why do we still need a subaltern public sphere?

We might provide two possible answers to this question. First of all, it might imply that the (formal) public sphere actually does not exist in Hong Kong. Instead, there are a number of subaltern public spheres that exist and that are capable of supporting the political polity in Hong Kong. The interaction between these subaltern public spheres would finally construct a (formal) public sphere for the people of Hong Kong.

Another possibility might be due to the present public sphere being a space where only mainstream opinions can be found. Opinions other than the mainstream ones are not going to be valued and would be considered as minority opinions. In light of this, the “minority group” would gather according to their different status, be they political, economic or social ones. They would seek other “spaces” for survival and would eventually form several subaltern public spheres. Hence, the subaltern public sphere of the youth of Hong Kong is just one of the cases.

Studying the subaltern public sphere of the youth of Hong Kong has been a very

constructive agenda in youth studies and social studies as well. According to the subaltern public sphere theorists, a well-functioning subaltern public sphere can finally influence the wider public, change the state policy and promote the health of the public sphere. A subaltern public sphere provides a space where young people can build-up their discourses and train their critical thinking through open and free discussions. These activities may in turn encourage more young people to construct their discourses. This may even let them prepare themselves as elite members and professionals in politics in the future. And if the subaltern public sphere of the youth can be found to co-exist with the dominant public sphere, it may act as a building block to promote the development of democracy in Hong Kong as it represents an alternative discursive space to the public sphere.

In addition, this is probably the first attempt to define the “subaltern” as a “youth group” in the study of the public sphere. Past studies used to define “subaltern” as a suppressed group with respect to their social status. In this study, we try to stratify the “youth group” as one of the socially recessive groups. This may enrich the subaltern public sphere theory by expanding its reference.

This study may not be able to portray the whole picture of the present scene of political participation by the youth of Hong Kong. However, it distinguishes itself from the present studies about youth political participation in Hong Kong by providing a theoretical framework of the subaltern public sphere for discussion. It is hoped that the findings of this paper could offer help in the strategic planning of youth development and in promoting the growth of public sphere in Hong Kong society.



## **Outline of the Thesis**

This paper is presented in five chapters. The first chapter presents a general picture of the political environment in Hong Kong and of the youth of Hong Kong. This background information might offer some justification for adopting the notion of the subaltern public sphere as the theoretical framework for studying the youth of Hong Kong's political participation. This is because "subaltern public sphere theory is advantageous in its sensitivity to social differences and the domination and resistance among the differentiated social groups" (Fraser, 1992).

The second chapter provides a historical review of the theory of a public sphere by Habermas. This includes the theory's origins and principles. With the basic understanding of Habermas' public sphere, an overview of the notion of a subaltern public sphere is discussed and its characteristics are identified for the purpose of operational measurement in later chapters.

The third chapter outlines the research method used by this study. There are two parts of data collection. The first part is a secondary analysis of the data obtained from a questionnaire survey conducted in June 2002. The survey covered several areas including the political attitude of the youth of Hong Kong, which is being used for this study. It was conducted in three secondary schools of different background. Altogether 674 questionnaires were collected. The second part is the in-depth interviews. Based on the information and data provided in the survey, 24 follow-up interviews were conducted with respondents from the questionnaire survey to further evaluate their attitudes and behavior towards social and political participation.

The fourth chapter presents the findings from the data collection. By using the

operational measurement established in Chapter 3, this part also answers the research questions -- whether there are any open and free political discussions among the youth of Hong Kong, and their characteristics; whether these open and free discussions are likely to be generated as a subaltern public sphere of the youth of Hong Kong.

The final chapter contributes a further discussion on the subaltern public sphere of the youth of Hong Kong. The reasons for the existence of a subaltern public sphere for the youth of Hong Kong, but not a public sphere, and how this subaltern public sphere works properly in achieving the democratic development of Hong Kong society is also discussed. Finally, the implication of the study will also be presented.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

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According to the theory of public spheres by Habermas, a public sphere is a place where people can conduct open and free discussions on social and political issues without the fear of government interference. In this study, I am particularly interested in looking at the role of Hong Kong's young people in the public sphere. Are they participants in this sphere? Why do studies and research always reach pessimistic results and draw conclusions of an apathetic youth of Hong Kong. Do they mean the youth does not conduct any open and free discussions on political matters? Or only that their form of discussion is somewhat different from the traditional, mainstream one? Before we go into the answers to these questions, we should first have a detailed examination of the notion of the public sphere and then the subaltern public sphere.

### **Habermasian Public Sphere**

The German sociologist, Jürgen Habermas, studied the pattern of public spheres in liberal society. His work (Habermas, 1989) examines the emergence and transformation of the sphere in order to understand the development of a democratic society. He defines the public sphere as "a homogenous space of embodies subjects in symmetrical relations, pursuing consensus through critique of arguments and presentations of validity claims" (Habermas, 1989). The concept of a "public sphere" is a fundamental concept of the theory of democracy and denotes all the conditions democracy requires – a liberal political culture and the institutional support of a public sphere (Habermas, 1992).

Habermas argues in his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that the development of mercantile capitalism in the sixteenth century, together with the changing institutional forms of political power, created the conditions for the emergence



of a new kind of public sphere in early modern Europe, namely the bourgeois public sphere.<sup>11</sup> With this emergence of the bourgeois public sphere, a variety of new centers of sociability appeared in the towns and cities. These included the salons in France and coffee houses in Britain, which became the places of discussion where educated elites and professionals could interact with one another. By the first decade of the eighteenth century, coffee houses flourished so much that there were an estimated three thousand coffee houses in London alone. These favorable conditions further nourished the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere.

The new sphere of a bourgeois public consisted of private individuals who came together to debate among themselves the regulation of civil society and the conduct of the state. This new public sphere was not part of the state but was, on the contrary, a sphere in which the activities of the state could be confronted and subjected to criticism. The medium of this confrontation was itself significant: it was the public use of reason, as articulated by private individuals engaged in argument that was in principle open and unconstrained.

### **Basic Principles of the Public Sphere by Jürgen Habermas**

Based on Habermas' understanding of the public sphere: "public" means open and available to the public, being open for all to see, to hear, to act or to know about; "sphere" means a place for a visible act or a platform for an open act or performance; hence, "public sphere" means a place where citizens come together to discuss issues of

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<sup>11</sup> According to Habermas, there are at least four kind of institutions of public sphere in human society. They are the representative public sphere, literary sphere, bourgeois or liberal public sphere and mass media public sphere. They correspond to different historical stages. The representative public sphere existed in the feudal society of the High Middle Ages. The literary public sphere was built in the world of letters and bridged the old courtly public sphere and the new bourgeois public sphere. The bourgeois public sphere was established when literary critique turned into political debate. At last, mass media replaced all the coffee houses and salons and became the institutions of today's bourgeois public sphere.



common interest and try to establish a social order oriented towards the common good. Nevertheless, later on, mass media development expanded the space for public discussions without time and space constraints which managed to generate a “new social space of field” (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991, p.3). The “public” was then further extended into “private people using their own critical reason came together to create a public.”

According to Habermas, there are three main principles of the public sphere. They are absolute independence from the state, universal accessibility and deliberative discourses. Since these three principles could help us to establish the operational measurement of the subaltern public sphere of the youth of Hong Kong, we would like to give a brief account of them.

#### Absolute Independence from the State

As mentioned previously, the newly emerged “public sphere” was a bourgeois public sphere, which consisted of private individuals coming together to debate among themselves the regulation of civil society and the conduct of the state. This new public sphere was not part of the state but was a sphere in which the activities of the state could be confronted and subjected for criticism. Hence, the essential constituent of the bourgeois public sphere was “the fight for independence from the state” (Habermas, 1989). It required a clear separation between the private realm and public power, which the public sphere had created as an institutional space for the bourgeois public sphere. Any violation of this clear-cut relation would destroy its survival.

#### Universal Accessibility

A public sphere is a realm in which individuals gather for open and free discussions.

Potentially everyone has access to it, nobody enters into the discourse in the public sphere with any advantage over another. For instance, the periodical press in the early eighteenth century was taken as a space which is independent from the state by holding a wide spread of opinion concerning parliamentary matters. Public opinion was formed by the “open debate, critical scrutiny, full reportage, increased accessibility, and independence of actors from crude economic interest as well as from state control” (Webster, 1995, p.103). In short, Habermas’ public sphere assumes that, quantitatively, every citizen is allowed to enter the open and free discussion spaces.

### Deliberative Discourses

Yet in all the manifestations of the public sphere, the principles of equality and accessibility are indispensable, despite the fact that people have different socio-economic backgrounds. Habermas suggested that discourse in the public sphere should be “restricted to deliberation about the common good, and that appearance of private interests is always undesirable” (Habermas, 1989). Discursive contestation and belief in rationality should be a means of achieving matters of common good. Therefore, Habermas’ public sphere proposes that, qualitatively, the discussions should be conducted in a deliberative and critical manner.

### **The Potential Public Sphere for Hong Kong Youth**

This study aims to examine and elucidate the Hong Kong youth’s social and political participation: if they are able to form opinion through open debate or free discussions in the form of a public sphere. And if we want to discover their public sphere, it might be a good attempt to gauge how much potential the youth has for establishing their public sphere.



### Participation - Without a Trace

Recent research and studies on the topic of the youth of Hong Kong and politics can roughly be classified into two main types. The first type would focus on the youth of Hong Kong's political empowerment and the construction of their own social space (Lee, 1999, 2002; Mok, 1999; Ngai, 2000). "Empowerment" is a core concept in many disciplines like education, political and economic development, democratic theory or feminist politics (Schwerin, 1995). It is the "process of the dominant power or legal authority permitting or giving power or abilities to another individual or a group having less power, or as gaining power over another person" (Schwerin, 1995). Hence, these studies emphasized how the youth in Hong Kong are supported or facilitated in becoming empowered for social and political participation. They suggested that Hong Kong young people who consider themselves as knowing more about society or politics or as having higher self-esteem would participate more in social and political activities. They also understand more what political rights they may enjoy and what responsibilities they should take.

The other stream examines how the activist groups and non-governmental organizations use the institutions as a tool, facilitating some forms of political agitation by encouraging the youth to organize or participate in collective actions (HKFYG, 1994, 2000; Lee, 1995; Ngai, 1999). These studies are usually done by measuring the young people's political attitudes. For instance, their intention to vote if given necessary conditions and their degree of support over certain dimensions - support for direct elections, support for lowering the voting age, political tolerance, trust in China's guarantees, and participation in various organizations.

The conclusions of these studies very often identified the youth of Hong Kong as an



“apolitical” and “apathetic” group because of their low intention to participate in public affairs and the failure in applying the empowerment theory to the investigation/ study. And their apolitical-ness is generally recognized as caused by their low motivation and political-knowledge deficiency, as well as an infertile political environment for the mass public.

In political science, these concerns are the domain of the political socialization sub-field. In other disciplines, such as political psychology, scholars continue to show interest in the matters of the sources of ideology, values, knowledge, and issue positions of young people in political participation. Parents, the news media, teachers, political scientists and others have been concerned about the process by which children acquire and hold political values.

Political scientists generally believe that parents, schools, peers and the news media influence the political socialization<sup>12</sup> of children, and roughly in that order of importance. Nevertheless, while each of these has an impact, researches that focused exclusively on these agents of socialization camp up with no significant results at all. For example, Jennings and Niemi (1974, 1981) in their classic panel study demonstrated a low correlation<sup>13</sup> between parent and child ideology, and that it declines with age. If parents have so little enduring significance, they suggested that there may be no answer to the question of how young people learn about politics.

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<sup>12</sup> Patterson (1993:420) defines socialization as “a process by which individuals obtain relevant knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to function competently in the socio-political structure.”

<sup>13</sup> A tau value = .34

## Disclosing Tracks of Participation

Although research repeatedly suggested the apolitical-ness of the youth of Hong Kong, evidence of their participation in public affairs can still be located. We are able to discover their desire to pursue a democratic Hong Kong city and their compositional vectors in defining democratic values.

### *Desire for a democratic society*

Under the present politically rich atmosphere<sup>14</sup> in Hong Kong, young people have recently set up a number of pro-democracy political groups. These include the 7.1 People Pile, Civic Act-Up and New Youth Forum. They aim to strive to push ahead with democracy in Hong Kong. This was a newborn phenomenon before the year 2001. They contested District Council elections and also successfully motivated young people to participate in marches or demonstrations.<sup>15</sup>

Besides, study of the participation of the youth of Hong Kong in the Legislative Council Elections (HKFYG, 2000) also showed that among the young people's registered voters a vast majority said that they would vote in the coming elections. And it was found that most young respondents believed that voting was an important way to express their opinions, to exert their influence or to learn about democracy. Their positive attitude in pursuing a democratic society could imply their supportive attitude for a public sphere,

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<sup>14</sup> See "Voices from the crowd", South China Morning Post, July 5, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> People Pile (七一人民批), named after the mass protest in Hong Kong on July 1, 2003 is a small pro-democracy political group in the HKSAR. It was established on August 10, 2003. The group is formed by a group of youths in their 20s and 30s. Its aim is to strive to push ahead democracy in Hong Kong, to extend the "people's power" of the July 1 protests. Civic Act-up (公民起動) was founded on Sept 24, 2003 by a group of relatively young activists with the encouragement of Legislative Councilor Ho Sau-lan, to challenge the existing pro-Government District Councilors in Wanchai. The aim of the group is to promote youth participation in political and social affairs, to serve the community, and to focus on the rights of youth.



whether it is dominant one or a subaltern one.

### *Increased Access to the Public Sphere*

Habermas' public sphere came about with the rise of the "coffee-shop culture". The public came together to debate among themselves the regulation of civil society and the conduct of the state in the coffee break. Although we borrowed the concepts from Habermas' public sphere theory in generating the possibility of the existence of the youth of Hong Kong's subaltern public sphere, we would not expect that coffee shops in Hong Kong are demonstrating the same functions as those in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Hong Kong is a modern city with a tremendous range of communication channels for the public to express their opinions regarding personal, social and political affairs. Therefore, the "public places for debating the regulation of civil society and the conduct of the state" are definitely not limited to coffee houses. Besides the traditional form of face-to-face communication, many technological communication channels could provide "spaces" for open and free discussions with the same effect as the coffee shops. These can be televised debating programs, radio phone-in programs, newspapers as well as the Internet. The places and chances for young people to conduct these discussions have increased, however, has there been a directly proportionate increase in the amount of these open and free discussions? This answer is in doubt.

Ho (2001) in his article analyzing the low level of political participation of the youth of Hong Kong in recent years suggested that the main reasons are due to the infertile political culture of individuals, the adult-centered political system and a lack of civic education systems. He concluded the sense of powerlessness would remain as the



prominent reason for the young people's disinterest in participating in political affairs. Other factors such as family, peer group cultures seem to have no visible effect on this situation. The most significant, but not most effective, solution is political education by the schools. It is argued that advanced information and communication technology can enhance political participation because it can increase the chance of individuals discussing and expressing their opinions.

### *The Deliberative Youth of Hong Kong*

Although studies have for a long time pointed out that the youth of Hong Kong were apathetic about social and political affairs, nevertheless, there are some highlighting figures that suggest to us this might not be the whole picture. Every year, HKFYG conducts research among the youth of Hong Kong about their values or attitude towards social matters, political issues, sex, money, ethics etc. It reported that the understanding of the youth in society is somewhat different from that shown by research and studies. The figures show that over 60% of young people paid most attention to local social news, international news and local political news. They think that studying and working hard is a way of fulfilling social responsibilities. They did not agree that students should concentrate more on their studies but think less about society's affairs.<sup>16</sup> Research also shows that over 50% of youth disagreed that Hong Kong people should concentrate more on the economy than on political affairs.<sup>17</sup> And over 70% of the respondents expressed that when they are faced with teenagers not fulfilling civic responsibilities, they would remind them of their responsibilities.

We might have to assess the enthusiasm of the youth of Hong Kong for social and

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<sup>16</sup> See "Topic 1: Individual and Society", Comparative Youth Study Series, April 1994, HKFYG.

<sup>17</sup> See "Topic 3: Nation and Ethnicity", Comparative Youth Study Series, October 1994, HKFYG.

political affairs to decide whether they are political active or passive and thus the possibility of forming their public sphere. Society used to associate the ideas “apathetic” and “apolitical” with the youth of Hong Kong. As a matter of fact, most of the youth of Hong Kong feel “isolated” and “powerless” to influence any issues in the social and political domain. With regard to this alienated environment, most of them may prefer to be silent because speaking out may be “useless”, even though they want to speak up. Because of their voiceless, we might have to explore what actually they are caring and concerning in their lives. Regarding this question, this study tries to explore the ways in which Hong Kong young people have open and free discussions on social and political affairs. By amplifying the noise of this perceived speechless group, I will try to locate this “subaltern” or “suppressed” group of the youth of Hong Kong from their participation. Are they present as a form of the public sphere? Or are they present in a subaltern way as a “subaltern public sphere”?

### **The Subaltern Public Sphere of Hong Kong Youth**

Studies of open and free political discussions of Hong Kong youth from the grand theory of the Habermasian public sphere are probably the least found, if at all. Before we fine-tune this grand theory in order to better measure the real data collected, we should first identify the definition of a public sphere from the Habermasian perspective.

#### **Defining the Public Sphere**

The distinctiveness of the notion of a public sphere is its “potential as a foundation for a critique of society based on democratic principles”. The public sphere is not part of the state; on the contrary, it is a sphere in which the activities of the state could be subjected to criticism. Based on this fundamental principle, a public sphere has two basic characteristics. First of all, the unitary public sphere requires universal accessibility,



which brackets social inequalities. Second of all, it requires a deliberative discourse.

For the universal accessibility, everyone has access to a unitary public sphere, whereas nobody enters into the discourse in the public sphere with any advantage over another. However, Habermas' full accessibility is a failed attempt as social inequalities can hardly be eliminated in reality. The unitary public sphere rather than multiple public spheres is also a problem, because this unitary sphere "operates for the advantage of dominant groups (like the bourgeois)"(Fraser, 1992) and finally, spaces are not given for subordinated groups (like feminist counter public and the working class) for deliberative discussions.

About the deliberative discussions, discourse should be rational or critical in seeking the mutual understanding and common goods of the sphere. In reaching this common good, the bracketing of inequalities has downright an obstacle block to the subordinate by putting them in an inferior position to the dominant group. The voices of the subordinate groups are suppressed, degraded or ignored and their participation in the discussion of public issues is not intended to change the decisions or policies made by the dominant group. They just conceive it as a place to express their grievances.

To conclude, Habermas' account of the public sphere is a unitary sphere for all social members, regardless of their social inequalities. Individuals enter the sphere and interact with each other for deliberative discourse. This interaction would help to draw in "marginal" or "periphery" social members to the dominant, centered groups and finally promote a unitary public sphere.



### Theory of multiple public spheres

From the Habermasian perspective of public spheres, a unitary public sphere requires universal accessibility, bracketing of social inequalities and deliberate discussions. By re-examining Jurgen Habermas' definition of the public sphere, Nancy Fraser claims that Habermas fails to account for the existence of subaltern public spheres in a stratified society and thus "ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere." (MacLaughlin, 1993). According to Fraser, the conception of participatory democracy should be grounded in a new understanding of the public sphere as a discursive arena for the realization of multiple social identities. Therefore, the theory of multiple public spheres or subaltern public spheres or counter publics would give a more comprehensive account of the public sphere.

Studies of the subaltern public sphere are not extensively found. It can be said there are none for the youth research. Felski (1989) criticizes Habermas' ideas from the perspective of feminism. She queried whether a rational and uniform subject is the foundation for a democracy society as well as whether the public sphere needs to account for gender differences. She suggested that women are actually actively constructing a women's public sphere, in both rational and affective ways.

Fraser (1992) suggested the exclusion nature of woman in public sphere, though she adheres to basic norms of rational discourse in the subaltern public spheres. She believes participants of the subaltern public spheres benefit from the critical discussions and that common good will be reinforced from the rational activities of this specific group. However, she disagrees with Habermas' claims that "the rationality of the bourgeois could help them to extend their public sphere continuously and absorb the other classes" (Habermas, 1992) and suggested that rationality only exists in certain

social groups with their own interests.

Away from the studies of feminism, Negt & Kluge (1993) investigated the matter of a proletariat public sphere. They defined the public sphere as “a horizon for the organization of social experience”. The proletarian public sphere is about the experience of production and reproduction; “the separation of the experiencing subjects from the networks of public expression and representation” and “the resistance and imaginative strategies as a response to the separation”. This means they demolish Habermas’ rationality in discourse by addressing the claim that “any practices that bring the proletarian experience into the visible horizon of social experience could be the embodiment of public sphere.”

In addition to the subaltern groups of the women and proletariat public spheres, other new genres of studies like the cultural public sphere (Bolin, 2000), black public sphere (Dawson, 1995; Austin, 1997; Squires, 2002), and partial public sphere (Hansen, 1993) contributed to establishing the theory of the subaltern public sphere. Nonetheless, their contributions are no more than that of the women and proletariat public sphere studies.

### Defining the Subaltern Public Sphere

The studies of the “subaltern” first appeared in a journal in 1982, edited by Ranajit Guha. The term “subaltern” was taken from Gramsci’s euphemism for the proletariat in his Prison Notebooks. However, the subaltern studies collective used it as a “catch-all” term for all groups they viewed as oppressed – the proletariat, the peasantry, women, and convicts. They are of secondary social status in the time of their society. Thereafter, theorists who study the notion of public spheres called the social groups that exist outside the mainstream public as the subaltern (Fraser, 1992) or counterpublics (Asen &



Brouwer, 2001; Warner, 2002).

By the previously revised notion of subaltern, which directed to any subordinated groups from the dominant group in the society, we assumed that the youth groups should also be treated as one of those oppressed groups in Hong Kong society. “Subaltern” here means the youth group, which is relative to the dominant social groups. Because of their ultimate social status difference, the “multiple public sphere” is a more appropriate notion in discussing the possible public sphere among them, especially for its sensitiveness in taking social difference into account. Nevertheless, research about youth within the framework of a subaltern public sphere is rare in Hong Kong. This is probably due to the freshness of the theory of the subaltern public sphere and its incomplete definition.

Despite this, discussions about young people’s political participation are of prominent concern to government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as in academic research. The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups is one of the NGOs which contributes a considerable amount of resources to conducting opinion polls into the political attitudes and values of Hong Kong’s young people, periodic youth studies regarding the social and political hot issues of the time, and studies of youth trends in the areas of social, economic and political life. For instance, “The New Era of Governance: Youth’s Expectations on the Second Term of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government” (Youth Opinion Polls, No. 103, 2002) and “A Study on Social Capital with regard to Citizenship” (Youth Study Series, No.28, 2002). Lee (2000) admits in his studies of the empowerment model in youth work that Hong Kong is a society dominated by adults where the voices of young people are hardly heard. Limitations on the new generation participating in social affairs are identified



everywhere in the society at every level. In order to facilitate youth participation in political affairs, public acceptance of its uniqueness is essential. Channels could be opened up by the elimination of prejudice and misunderstanding against the youth groups.

Habermas' public sphere pointed out that the public sphere is more like "a discursive aspect of civil society in general". The embodiment of the public sphere could be as various as the coffee houses in early history and mass media in modern society. Our effort in locate the various discursive spaces in society should be extended to every level of society at large. The theory of multiple public spheres challenges the existence of a unitary public sphere by revealing that the bourgeois public sphere is actually a discrete class in society, which receives special attention. This discloses the failure of the theory of public sphere to bracket the inequalities in a civil society.

Therefore, the subaltern public sphere theory suggesting that in spite of any social, economic or gender inequalities, the significance of the presence of the subaltern public spheres should not be diminished, though they do indeed represent only a tiny little part of a society. The discursive spaces of certain social groups in society should be another field of study. In light of this, the subaltern public sphere is used in this thesis as an analytical framework, which is used to explain the discursive spaces among the youth of Hong Kong.

In looking back at the academic research and literatures, a clear definition of the "subaltern public sphere" is still lacking or varies to a very large extent depending on the domain of studies. Generally speaking, a subaltern public sphere should take over some of the basic principles that a public sphere possesses, but just holding a rather

secondary position to the dominant public sphere. The subaltern public sphere, in this sense, should: (1) have “potential as a foundation for a critique of society based on democratic principles”; (2) be a sphere in which individuals gather to participate in open discussions and has the “potential for access by all where nobody can enter into discourse in the public sphere with an advantage over another” and (3) be deliberative in discourse.

At the premises of a unitary public sphere, members of the bourgeois public sphere enter it as individuals with different social status, however, the subaltern public sphere does not allow this equal access but individuals enter their own subaltern sphere and then interact with other subaltern spheres and the dominant sphere. These dominant sphere and subaltern public spheres would finally composite a social space. The subaltern public spheres are differentiated by different social, economic, political and cultural statuses.

In the early stage of the bourgeois public sphere, “in relation to the mass of the rural people and the common people in towns, of course the public... was still extremely small” (Habermas, 1989). The elementary education was inferior and a reading public with the critical ability was not formed. However, the new commercial relationships created by the early capitalist commercial activities strengthened the bourgeois class and improved its public sphere. These new commercial relationships became the fundamental momentums to change the bourgeois from the subaltern position to the central one.

In addition, they expanded the number of the bourgeois and made the bourgeois the center of economic activity and then the political activity. In this sense, the bourgeois



public sphere is not a naturally dominant public sphere but one suppressed by the representative public sphere. In the early age of the bourgeois public sphere, it was as “subaltern” as the women or proletariat public spheres. This shows that the subaltern public has the potential to “escape” from its “subaltern” nature and be sublimated to the dominant one.

Though voices of these subaltern social groups were always ignored and eliminated, youth is always the important actor of our future society. What they believe and how they act tomorrow is actually rooted in today and that’s why youth researches have been valued as such. Yet the subaltern public seeks its ways to have dialogues with the dominant public, however, conflicts are always present between the dominant public and the subaltern public as the subaltern public are only realms for certain social groups.

In addition to these basic principles fundamental to the Habermasian public sphere, there are general and widely accepted functions of what the subaltern public sphere should have. Likewise, a subaltern public sphere may hold some but not necessarily all of them. And, they might not be of the same sequential order either.

**The Functions of Subaltern Public Sphere**

1. Provide & be a safe discursive space for the build-up of discourses
2. Help in clarifying members’ interests & making strategies
3. Constructing the identity of group members in purpose of reinforcement
4. Mobilizing potential subaltern group members
5. Expanding outward & influencing the wider public
6. Changing the state policy
7. Promoting the health of the public sphere

*Source: Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht (2002)*



## Chapter 3 Research Methodology

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This thesis, first of all, will try to investigate if there are any open and free political discussions among the proclaimed “apolitical” young people of Hong Kong. If open and free political discussions are found, their form of existence will be analyzed and their characteristics checked according to the theory of the subaltern public sphere. This aims to reveal whether their political discussions can be considered as a subaltern public sphere. Young people here are defined as the age between 13-24.

This study contains both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative part will be in the form of a secondary analysis of a questionnaire survey conducted in 2002. After this, follow-up interviews were carried out with the respondents who participated in the questionnaire survey.

### **Questionnaire Survey: Youth of Hong Kong Values 2002**

This thesis adopts a secondary analysis of a questionnaire survey, **Youth Values (Hong Kong) 2002**. The survey is part of the youth project entitled Popular Culture Consumption and Youth Identities in Hong Kong: Trajectories and Transitions (1056/99H). The survey was conducted in June 2002, in the form of a questionnaire distributed to three secondary schools from three different districts in Hong Kong (North Point, Kwung Tong and Tin Shui Wai).<sup>18</sup> Cluster sampling was used. The samples are of different grades from Form 3-6 and different religious background

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<sup>18</sup> Buddhist Mau Fung Memorial College (佛教茂峰法師紀念中學), 18 Tin Pak Road, Tin Shui Wai, Yuen Long, NT; Kiangsu-Chekiang College (蘇浙公學), 20 Braemar Hill Road, North Point, HK; S. K. H. Leung Kwai Yee Secondary School (聖公會梁季彝中學), 28 Hiu Ming Street, Kwun Tong, Kln.

(secular, protestant and Buddhism). This can ascertain the maximization of respondents' backgrounds. Respondents' age and gender were also recorded. They are aged from 14 to 21 with a male to female ratio of approximately 1: 0.98 (corr. to 2 d.p.).<sup>19</sup> Altogether 674 questionnaires were collected. All the questionnaires were filled out by students under the monitoring of teachers.

Every year, the HKFYG<sup>20</sup> conducts a survey of a wide range of youth values in Hong Kong. By claiming the comprehensiveness of their survey, however, the questionnaire is not able to investigate youth values in specific areas. In light of this, the questionnaire used in this study was re-designed in a way to measure some of the critical areas of youth that are not well covered by the youth of Hong Kong Committee. It was developed to aim at a more in-depth investigation on Hong Kong youth's political attitudes, consumption patterns and values on love and sexual relations. Responses in the political attitude section will be adopted as the core data analysis for the first part of the thesis.

### **The Political Attitude of Hong Kong Youth**

The existence of any open and free political discussions among the youth groups depends largely on their impressions of and interest in politics. Young people in Hong Kong are rather cynical about politics as conventionally defined – that is, about the actions of politicians. While they were sometimes irrelevant or dismissive, they could also be distinctly bitter and forceful. Politicians were often condemned, not merely as

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<sup>19</sup> There are 338 male and 331 female respondents with 5 missing data.

<sup>20</sup> The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups was founded in 1960 and is one of the largest non-profit-making youth agencies in Hong Kong. It publishes and distributes research reports covering its continuous research activities into all areas of social, political and economic life, about the values, behaviors, needs and problems encountered by the young people in Hong Kong. They aim at a consistent update of information that can assist in the formulation of youth policies and in the planning of youth services.



boring, but also as corrupt, uncaring, insincere and self-interested; and politics was widely dismissed as a kind of dishonest game (Cheung & Leung, 1995). The students explained the reasons for these views in terms of their own inability to intervene or participate. Since they could not make any difference to what happened, why should they make the effort to find out about it? Nevertheless, when they acknowledged that social and political changes might well have implications for themselves or their families, they started to realize their political attitude is actually no more than a kind of lifestyle. They learnt to know that passive detachment from politics is not any way out for the construction of their own spheres.

In order to investigate whether there are any open and free political discussions among the Hong Kong youth, questions in the questionnaire have addressed their values and attitudes towards certain social and political issues. The questions aim to see what is their degree of agreement in participating those matters. It is presumed that the more positive emotion the respondents have towards the issues, the higher is the chance of them taking part in them, as well as being more willing to express themselves over those issues.

Firstly, respondents are asked to express their degree of: (a) pride about the success of China to be the holder of the Olympics 2008; (b) pride about China joining the World Trade Organization (WTO); (c) pride about the establishment of Disneyland in Hong Kong; (d) pride about the handover of Hong Kong to China; (e) anger about the occasional criticisms on the human rights issues of China by the US; (f) anger about the bombing of the embassy of China in Yugoslavia by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); (g) anger about the occasional interfering on the issue of the China-Taiwan relationship by the US. They were asked to choose from the five options:



“strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree” and “strongly agree”. The statements tested in this questionnaire are designed with a series of national affairs. The degree of the young people’s devotion will show us their concern and attitude towards these national affairs and the likeliness of their participation as well.

Secondly, respondents are asked to express how they agree, “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree” and “strongly agree”, on five education policies of the Hong Kong educational reform. They are (a) whether you agree with the canceling of the examination for promoting to secondary schools; (b) whether you agree with the one-queue education policy; (c) whether you agree with the mother-tongue teaching policy; (d) whether you agree with implementation of the teacher's language proficiency examination and (e) whether you agree with the encouragement of the direct sponsor school policy. It is true that education has long been the most concerning issue for Hong Kong’s young people as indicated by most research into indicators of social development. The educational reforms, hence, are perceived as a salient topic for the youth, their responses towards various new educational policies will tell us what they think and how they perform in the discussion over these matters.

Thirdly, respondents are asked to express their attitudes towards certain kinds of political action that are commonly practiced by the public. This time, respondents are told to indicate how much they agree with political actions in the form of: (a) demonstration; (b) sit-in action; (c) civil disobedience; (d) legal means; (e) open debate; (f) open statement; and (g) using media, again from the five options: “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree” and “strongly agree” provided. These tested statements are able to trigger their responses to political affairs in a much more direct way. They may or may not participate in these activities. However, as we presumed at the

beginning, the more positive responses the respondents have towards the matter, the higher is the chance of them taking part in it or that they have had a pertinent experience in the past.

In addition, respondents are asked the time spent on various daily activities on a relative basis. There are seven items which are (a) time spent browsing the Internet; (b) time spent in newsgroups; (c) time spent studying; (d) time spent in the internet café; (e) time spent chatting on the Internet; (f) time spent reading magazines and newspapers; (g) time spent watching television. This question can reveal the proportion of time they spend on group discussions or what means they use to conduct their discussions.

Based on the above questions and the data obtained from the questionnaire survey, we are able to examine the possible existence of open and free political discussions among the Hong Kong youth.

### **In-depth Interviews**

The questionnaire survey provided us with solid evidence of the possible existence of a “public sphere” among the youth. However, due to the limitation of the nature of quantitative data, it might be insensitive in measuring the forms of existence of these open and free political discussions. In light of this, in-depth interviews were conducted. They allow us to have a clearer picture of the characteristics of their discussions.

A total of 24 in-depth interviews were conducted in 3 schools, 8 for each school. Interviewees were chosen from the respondents who participated in the questionnaire survey and they were invited by the schoolteachers. The interviews were all conducted in a one-on-one face-to-face manner in their schools.



According to the central ideas of public sphere theory, the discussions of the public sphere focus on: (1) whether the “sphere” is absolutely independent from the state; (2) whether the sphere is a place to be opened for entering by anyone and where the social inequalities are to be bracketed; and (3) whether there is any deliberative, rational and critical discourse. Having fulfilled the above three conditions, the sphere is likely to be considered as an ideal public sphere model.

However, based on the multiple public sphere theory, theorists of the subaltern public sphere adopt some variations in their definition of a subaltern public sphere. Absolute independence from the state remains the primary principle. However, the accessibility and social inequalities are both going to be neglected, as it is already known that these two qualities are not likely to be solved practically. They have in the very first place admitted that social inequalities are not feasible to be bracketed.

In order to pinpoint the characteristics of the open and free discussions conducted by the interviewees, we preset some questions for the interviews. The interviewees were asked:

Q1: whether they like to have group chats or group discussions and why,

Q2: how often they engage in chats or discussions?

Q3: what are the topics or issues that they are likely to talk about in their chats or discussions, plus their reasons for (not) getting involved.

These questions might let us know whether they are getting involved in any open and free discussions on social and political affairs and the frequency of these discussions.

In addition, they were then asked:

Q4: What do they think about the statement “Hong Kong youth are apolitical”?

Q5: What do they think about the statement “the reason the Hong Kong youth are not

interested in social and political affairs is because of the feeling of powerlessness to get involved that the young people experience”.

These two questions were put to them in order to explain the reasons for the widely accepted, but confrontational fact - Hong Kong youth are apolitical.

After that, they were asked about:

Q6: whether there are any social and political affairs that once drew their attention / triggered any group discussions / about which they have an opinion to express, and what are those affairs.

This question can let me locate the exact “issue” that the young people would keep an eye on. It can also help towards checking for the social and political affairs that interested them most.

Based on these questions, they were asked:

Q7: Whether they would express their thoughts in the group or even to the public, and if yes, which channels do they usually use (besides face-to-face discussions).

Finally, they were asked:

Q7: What they or their group thought could be achieved or benefited through these group chats and discussions.

This question can help towards checking how deliberative or rational are their group chats and discussions about social and political affairs, which is a very important component of the idea of the subaltern public sphere – deliberative discourse.

In addition to the question part, the interviewees’ demographic information was also recorded. This might provide a more comprehensive angle in analyzing what kind of young people are likely to be found in the subaltern public sphere. Table 1 indicates the



demographics of a total of 24 interviewees. We will try to observe if there are any relations between their performance and their gender, age or family income in the later part.

**Table 1: Demographic Information of Interviewees**

Case	Nickname	Gender	Age	Family Income (/mth)	Pocket \$ (/mth)	School
1.	Ah King	M	15	~10-20K	400-500	1
2.	Chan	M	17	~40-50K	1200	1
3.	BB	F	16	~60K	2000	1
4.	Ah dee	M	19	~20-30K	500	1
5.	Ling	F	17	~20K	800	1
6.	Ah Chu	M	18	~10-20K	300	1
7.	Ah Lou	M	16	~20K	N/A*	1
8.	Yee	F	18	~30-40K	N/A*	1
9.	Sandy	F	14	~60-70K	1000	2
10.	Yan	F	15	~80K	2000	2
11.	Sam	M	16	~30K	200-300	2
12.	Ah Kin	M	16	~20-40K	150	2
13.	Kenneth	M	18	~10-20K	500	2
14.	Wai	M	20	~30-40K	1500	2
15.	Sii	F	18	~20K	800	2
16.	Chris	M	17	~20-30K	1000-2000	2
17.	Peter	M	17	~30K	1000	3
18.	Chui	M	17	~20K	700-800	3
19.	Jia Jia	F	14	~20-30K	1000	3
20.	May	F	14	~50K	N/A*	3
21.	Lok	M	18	~20-30K	800	3
22.	Gigi	F	15	~20-30K	N/A*	3
23.	Emy	F	14	~20-30K	800	3
24.	Wing	M	17	~10K	N/A*	3

I. N/A\*: No definite amount of monthly pocket money, they would ask for the amount of money they need from parents whenever they have any consumptions.

II. School Code:    1. Buddhist Mau Fung Memorial College  
                              2. Kiangsu-Chekiang College  
                              3. S. K. H. Leung Kwai Yee Secondary School

## Chapter 4 Data Analyses

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### Existence of Political Discussions

In order to form a picture of the participation of the youth of Hong Kong in social and political affairs, a secondary analysis of the questionnaire survey is conducted. Their attitude and their concern over national affairs, educational reform and political actions was examined. We believe that the higher the level of their agreement on certain issues, the higher the chance they would participate in it and, the more willing they would be to express themselves. Therefore, we tried to measure their attitude towards various social and political issues.

#### I. Concern over National Affairs

Respondents were asked to express their level of agreement with statements about a series of national affairs. They were asked to choose from the five options: “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “neutral”, “agree” and “strongly agree”. Table 2 shows their attitudes towards various national affairs. As we are only concerned about the tendency of respondents to express themselves about such social and political affairs, only “disagree”, “neutral” and “agree” were presented.



**Table 2: Attitudes towards National Affairs**

	Disagree*	Neutral	Agree**	Total
a. pride about the Olympics	7.1%	40.5%	52.4%	100%
b. pride about the WTO	9.3%	44.4%	46.3%	100%
c. pride about Disney	6.8%	26.5%	66.6%	99.9% <sup>#</sup>
d. pride about the Handover	21.9%	49%	29.1%	100%
e. anger at US-Ch Human Rights	15.3%	47.5%	37%	99.8% <sup>#</sup>
f. anger at bombing of embassy	7.4%	44.7%	47.9%	100%
g. anger at US-Taiwan	10%	44.9%	45.1%	100%

\* Per cent of adding “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree”

\*\* Per cent of adding “Strongly Agree” and “Agree”

<sup>#</sup> Rounding Error

As shown in Table 2, the percentage of the disagreement and the percentage of the agreement are generally higher than the percentage of the neutral option, this point out that respondents have cognitively processed these messages and hence were supported by deliberative discourse. A prominent situation is from statement (c) that they “feel proud of the establishment of Disneyland in Hong Kong”. The percentage sum of the disagreement and the agreement is over the neutral option for 46.9%, while statements (a), (b), (f) and (g) have a general 10% over the neutral option. However, their response towards statements (d) and (e) is a bit different. The percentage sum of the disagreement and the agreement is less than 5% over the neutral option.

Their contrasting attitude towards the establishment of Disneyland in Hong Kong and other affairs is understandable. After all, this is a more personal issue from which the

young people can benefit the most directly. This suggested that the more salient the topics, the more willing they are likely to be to express themselves, whether they are classified as national affairs or not. On the other hand, the handover of Hong Kong to China has been considered as a very important historical moment, however, the youth has little active cognition about it (only a 2% difference between the percentage sum of the disagreement & the agreement and neutral position). From this point of view, we can explain why the youth of Hong Kong always appears to be an apolitical group: because studies might be done for a unitary incident – their attitude towards the handover of Hong Kong to China for example and if results are not comparable with those dominant groups, say the adults, then they are considered to be apathetic but the reason behind might never be disclosed.

For the various national affairs, respondents showed different degrees of concern. The degree is determined by their capability in processing the issues cognitively. They show more devotion to matters on a personal basis, followed by “international” issues (like in the statements (a), (b), (g) & (f)) and then issues that merely involved the relationship between two nations or countries, or issues defined by the dominant group as strictly “patriotic”, like statements (d) & (e).

The cognitive processing of information is backed up by their critical thinking and evaluation of values. And these values are probably the standard that they incline to when they are exposed to social and political issues.

## II. Concern over Hong Kong Educational Reform

With the series of education reforms put forward by the HKSAR government in recent years, statements about education policy are formulated in the questionnaire.



Respondents were asked to express how much they agree about five newly revised education policies.

**Table 3: Attitudes towards Education Policies**

	Disagree*	Neutral	Agree**	Total
a. canceling sec. exam	25.9%	35%	39.2%	100.1% <sup>#</sup>
b. one-queue ed. policy	38%	32.6%	29.3%	99.9% <sup>#</sup>
c. mother-tongue ed. policy	36.3%	31.5%	32.1%	99.9% <sup>#</sup>
d. teacher's language exam	6.6%	33.7%	59.6%	99.9% <sup>#</sup>
e. direct sponsor school policy	10.9%	51.1%	38%	100%

\* Per cent of adding “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree”

\*\* Per cent of adding “Strongly Agree” and “Agree”

<sup>#</sup> Rounding Error

From Table 3, the percentage sum of the disagreement and the agreement is higher than that of the neutral one of statements (a), (b), (c) & (d). Their difference is over 30% in general. However, their response towards statement (e) is a reverse case – the percentage sum of the disagreement and the agreement is 2.2% less than the neutral position.

By recalling the percentage difference obtained from their attitudes towards national affairs (approximately 10% in general) and their attitudes towards educational policies (approximately 30% in general), we found that their attitude/expression towards educational issues is much more contrasting. This discrepancy should be account for by a very strong justification behind them.

Studies about the participation of Hong Kong's young people in social and political affairs have often reached pessimistic conclusions. More often they have suggested that our young people are more likely to pay attention to entertainment only. However, education is considered to be a more salient topic for young people. They are the end-users of the education policies and are much more capable of understanding and evaluating them, especially for the policies in statements (a), (b), (c) & (d). They have shown us that they are more willing to talk more or express more about how they think and what they feel.

For their attitudes towards statement (e), we might suggest that Hong Kong's young people are more devoted to the issues that are a "fact" but not a "proposal". At the time the survey was done, the "direct sponsorship policy for schools" was the only policy among the others, which had not yet been executed. This explained their attitude contrasting to that towards the other four educational policies. We estimate it is because the relationship of the respondents with a "proposal" is far more indirect than with a "fact", since they are the final "actors" or "recipients" of a "fact" (the executed educational policies).

Furthermore, this might also be due to their degree of mental development. What distinguishes "youth" from "adult" is their degree of immaturity in every respect. Young people are subject to continuous learning stages during their growth. From the cognitive point of view of mental development, the analysis of a "proposal" involves assumptions and lots of possibilities, which pose greater difficulties than a "fact". This strengthens our use of the subaltern public sphere as the theoretical framework of this thesis, because young people are a destined "subaltern" group by nature, which has a different social status from the "dominant" group.



III. Attitudes Towards Political Actions

In order to avoid over-emphasis of their attitudes towards the social issues, we therefore tried to examine their attitudes towards a series of political actions. Respondents were asked to express their attitudes towards certain kinds of political action that are commonly practiced by the Hong Kong public. It is presumed that the more positive the inclination of respondents towards a matter, the higher is the chance of them taking part in it.

Table 4a: Attitudes Towards Political Actions

	Disagree*	Neutral	Agree**	Total
a. agree with demonstration	25.8%	44.7%	29.5%	100%
b. agree with sit-in action	23.4%	46.8%	29.8%	100%
c. agree with civil disobedience	44.7%	44.1%	11.2%	100%
d. agree with legal means	12.6%	46.9%	40.5%	100%
e. agree with open debate	8.9%	38.7%	52.4%	100%
f. agree with open statement	7%	34.7%	58.3%	100%
g. agree with using media	13.4%	43.6%	43.1%	100.1% #

\* Per cent of adding “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree”

\*\* Per cent of adding “Strongly Agree” and “Agree”

# Rounding Error

Table 4a shows that the percentage of the disagreement plus the percentage of the agreement in each of the seven statements is generally higher than the percentage of the neutral option; this shows that respondents have cognitive support in expressing their attitudes towards the political actions. It is worth highlighting the statement (f) about

how much they “agree with using open statement”. The percentage sum of the disagreement and the agreement is higher than the neutral option by more than 30%, while statement (e) has also got a difference of over 20%. Statements (a), (b), (c), (d) and (g) are only around 10% over the neutral option.

There is more than a 30% difference between the percentage sum of the disagreement and the agreement and the neutral option of statement (f) “agree with using open statement”. This figure is comparable with those differences for most of the educational policies in the previous part. We may conclude that Hong Kong young people take political action (in the form of “using open statement”) of similar importance as educational issues. This is a very encouraging finding meaning their attitudes towards some political matters are of the same importance as for education.

Besides, the most distinctive percentage differences were accounted for by statement (e) “agree with using open debate” and (f) “agree with using open statement”. These two statements represent a significant contribution to the public sphere theory. The second principle of an ideal (subaltern) public sphere is a deliberative discourse where rational discussions are conducted. Young people’s supportive attitude towards these components allow us to believe that they are a youth group that aims for a public sphere with the conditions spelt out by statements (e) and (f). And, this also suggested that, if the chances are given, they are likely to perform deliberative discussions on political issues.

By considering the different values underneath their attitudes hold, their attitudes towards the above-mentioned political actions is then subjected to a factor analysis for further evaluation. This is possible because the tested statements in this part are not



some unitary incidents as those in Part I and Part II. They are a collective means of taking action on political issues. Therefore, we can avoid drawing inappropriate and pessimistic conclusions about Hong Kong youth’s political participation, as most of the studies have.

**Table 4b: Factor Analysis of Attitudes Towards Political Action**

	Discursive-oriented	Action-oriented
a. whether agree with demonstration		.828
b. whether agree with sit-in action		.747
c. whether agree with civil disobedience		.748
d. whether agree with legal means	.732	
e. whether agree with open debate	.874	
f. whether agree with open statement	.857	
g. whether agree with using media	.587	

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotational Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Table 4b shows the factor analysis of respondents’ attitudes towards various political actions. The factor analysis successfully generated two components which represent two different values and attitudes held by respondents. They are identified as *action-oriented* and *discursive-oriented*. This classification shows us clearly that the political actions discussed by the tested statements are of two dimensions. With the previous account of the percentage difference, we were indicated that young people prefer to participate in discursive actions (the political actions described in statements (d), (e), (f) & (g)). If they have to take part in political actions, preferences would be given to those options,

especially by means of open debate and open statement. The relative low contribution by “legal means” and “using media” might point out two phenomena: (1) Our youth group are of limited professionalism or resources so that they do not depend very much on these two forms of practice”, and (2) Our youth still adopt first person face-to-face or immediate communication on these matters.

#### IV. Performance by Frequency

In addition to the youth’s attitudes towards social and political affairs, the frequency of their discussions is also another significant vector in assessing the possible existence of a subaltern public sphere. Therefore, we examined the time they spent on various daily activities. They were asked to record their time spent on 6 daily activities in terms of the number of hours per week: (1) the time they spent reading magazine and newspapers; (2) the time they spent watching television; (3) the time spent in an internet café; (4) the time spent browsing the Internet; (5) the time spent in newsgroups and (6) the time spent chatting on the Internet.

The time that respondents spent on internet browsing, in newsgroups and chatting on the Internet are comparatively longer among the 6 activities. This shows that they prefer an “interacting sphere” where they can have immediate response and interaction with members in groups which are of similar interests. Besides, we might observe that Hong Kong’s youth is an Internet-dependent group. They enjoy spending time browsing on the Internet, chatting on the Internet and contributing to newsgroups instead of spending time on the traditional media channels, like television and newspapers.

Internet use among the youth of Hong Kong has become one of their necessary activities. Practically speaking, young people can talk and share their thoughts when



chatting on the Internet with their own affiliates and form newsgroups on topics that interest them. The topics of their discussions are diverse in nature. They can also express anything without the fear of discouragement or intervention. This change of use of media might suggest to us that the existence of open and free political discussions can be found on the Internet instead of from the traditional means of media channels. Based on this observation, we will try to do a more in-depth analysis using the interviews with them in the next part.

We have examined the young people of Hong Kong's concern over some national affairs, the educational reform in Hong Kong and their attitudes towards a wide range of political actions. Their responses are highly selective and show different attitudes towards different issues cognitively. This gives us preliminary background information about the likeliness of Hong Kong's young people to be involved in social and political affairs. We might draw a small conclusion that Hong Kong young people are cognitively willing to express their views about public issues like national affairs, Hong Kong educational reform and political affairs with a significant frequency. With this cognitive willingness, it is reasonable to believe they have an interest in social and political affairs.

### **A Subaltern Public Sphere of Hong Kong Youth?**

The survey data suggested some new insights to us about the young people's unique way of identifying "social and political affairs", how often they got involved in the discussions and activities, as well as the possible birthplace of their public sphere. Nevertheless, the quantitative data is itself insensitive enough to answer the two research questions: whether there are any open and free political discussions and whether these open and free political discussions bear any characteristics of a subaltern

public sphere. In order to comprehend the underlying facts, data from interviews are applied to give a more comprehensive picture of the real situation. By examining the characteristics of young people’s open and free discussions, we will then try to scrutinize whether these discussion behaviors are likely to generate a subaltern public sphere in Hong Kong. We will also try to observe if there are any relations between young people’s performance and their gender, age or family income later on.

I. Varied Contents of Discussions

Almost no interviewees expressed that they do not enjoy “chatting”. This is very compatible with the previous finding that Hong Kong young people highly adopt the immediate-response and interactive way of communication. Then what are the commonly found topics of their chats or discussions? Table 5 is a summary of the topics of their chitchatting and discussions.

**Table 5: The Topics of Chitchatting & Discussions**

Gossip about Teachers and Classmates	Computer & TV Games
Jokes	Trendy Accessories
Food	TV Programs, Movies & Music
Sports	Love affairs
Studying	Clothing and Makeup
Comics	Family Stuff
Idols	Social & Political Issues

From the above table, we can see that there are a variety of topics in their chitchatting. Among these, gossiping about teachers and classmates are the most popular topics that



almost every interviewee gives it the highest frequency in their chitchatting.

Peter: “We usually chitchat about teachers and classmates, some daily nonsense or jokes...”

Sii: “Gossiping about classmates and teachers.”

Lok: “We talk about many topics...usually about classmates’ stuff...and TV games, basketball...”

The great variety of discussion shows that they enjoy gathering together and discussing the issues they are interest in, it is their way of practicing expressing their interests. However, social and political issues are one of the least popular topics they involved in their discussions. Only a few of them recorded social and political discussions as their chitchat topics. When the interviewer tried to trigger their response on this, they expressed that:-

Wai: “...Ah! (with a scared and doubtful facial expression) Politics?  
Well, not much...people will think you are insane even if we talk about it ..... (why it’s insane to do so?) because we are not supposed to talk about politics...and it’s true that I prefer to talk about some fun stuff like computer games, basketball...”

Peter: "...about politics...probably not."

Sii: "We seldom talk about social or political issues...because we don't consider them as personal stuff, and we just feel it's kind of boring and are not interested in them."

The response of Peter towards social and political discussions is probably the most typical one among the many others. Generally speaking, others taking a similar stand identify the reasons that they are not interested in social and political discussions as "not interesting"; "boring agenda"; "not salient to them" and "it's too serious for us" / "I think we are not qualified for that."

On the contrary, some interviewees give a very positive attitude towards participating in discussions of these matters even if they are a minority. For these young people, social and political affairs are topics that are as personal as family stuff. Some of them also claimed that actually social and political affairs are everywhere in our lives. As a matter of fact, these interviewees have very good articulation of the social and political affairs.

Yee: "I agree that generally speaking young people are not too enthusiastic about participating in it, I guess that's probably because they think politics is boring.....however, I would think social and political affairs are just so close to us that we didn't realize their



importance. You know, people always neglect things around us the most.”

Yee thought that the reason why young people do not talk about social and political affairs is because it is something too “usual” and “common”. Because of this, these issues do not arouse their interest enough to talk about them. To them, these issues are nothing new, but a game with the adults fooling around. Yee’s insight somehow suggested to us that part of our youth is actually treating social and political issues as part of their daily lives or like the background of their daily lives. As Yee’s case, she of course concerns about what’s going to happen in her daily life, and what she or the young people are going to talk about would be something that they pick out from these backgrounds as some interesting and funny stuff, for example, gossip and jokes.

May: “Social and political affairs are highly salient to us, I do pay attention to them and sometimes discuss them with classmates. We discuss them because we think they are something highly close to us.”

May’s case pointed out that young people’s participation in social and political discussion is a practice of living. They cognitively agreed with the importance of social and political discussions to them and so, a certain amount of discussions were conducted.

Ah Chu: “I am very interested in public issues. I just feel I should care more about my society and should know what’s happening around me... I know not many of my classmates are doing the same as me, but I still have got many classmates or friends who can conduct discussions with me on these topics .....

On the other hand, Ah Chu has a different attitude towards showing his concern over social and political affairs. He mentioned some of these affairs that once drew his attention. For instance, “Buy car incident of Antong Leung”<sup>21</sup>, “Sally Aw’s corruption”<sup>22</sup> and “Article 23 of Basic Law”. And he thought that social and political issues are not boring at all but inspiring and worthy of discussion.

From the issues that Ah Chu payed attention to, we can see that they are not merely some “gossiping” issues. They range from the performance of chief government officials to legislative issues. Ah Chu commented that the government's unwillingness to take action after Leung’s scandal broke brought into question Tung's commitment to establishing an accountable government. The Cargate Scandal (Buy car incident of Antong Leung) - Leung has come in for severe criticism since January 2003, when he bought a HK\$790,000 (US\$101,282) luxury car just weeks before he raised the tax on new vehicles in his March budget. Although Leung claimed that he had decided on the

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<sup>21</sup> Antony Leung Kam-chung is the former Financial Secretary of the HKSAR. Leung resigned with immediate effect on July 16, 2003. No reason was given for Leung's departure, but the car scandal was probably one of the problems in Leung's chequered tenure.

<sup>22</sup> Sally Aw Sian, the proprietor of one of the oldest media groups – Sing Dao Group, an old family friend of the Chief Executive and a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference.



tax increase after buying the car, which he said his family needed, news of the car purchase dealt a blow to the Hong Kong government's credibility as well as the effectiveness of the newly introduced Principal Officials Accountability System (POAS).<sup>23</sup>

Besides, he also thinks that Elsie Leung, Secretary for Justice, deciding not to prosecute the local media tycoon Sally Aw is a decision that caused serious concern over the Secretary for Justice's independence in prosecution policy and the fairness of the Hong Kong legal system. Sally Aw's Corruption - three staff members, including two senior executives, of the Hong Kong Standard, an English-language newspaper of the Sing Tao Group - were convicted for fraudulently boosting circulation figures to deceive advertisers in January 1999. Sally Aw Sian was named as a co-conspirator to defraud but not prosecuted when they were arrested in June 1997, weeks before the handover. There were rumors that the Secretary for Justice had been under pressure not to prosecute Sally Aw, who is a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and has a close relationship with Tung Chee-hua, the SAR chief executive. Elsie Leung claimed that the decision against prosecuting Sally Aw was made because of the lack of evidence and fears that it could lead to the collapse of the Sing Tao Group, one of the media groups with the longest history in Hong Kong. Since this would also have thrown more than 1,000 people out of work. Leung said it was not in the (Hong Kong) public's interests to prosecute Aw Sian.

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<sup>23</sup> The POAS was brought into effect on 1 July 2002. The HKSAR Government implemented the Principal Officials Accountability System, which was designed to make the government more responsive to public concerns, and added a layer of 11 political appointees, directly responsible to the Chief Executive, to run the 11 policy bureaux. The accountability system is similar to the UK's ministerial system in that they both require principal officials to bear political responsibility.

Regarding the “Basic Law Article 23”,<sup>24</sup> Ah Chu gives us probably the most vigorous reaction in criticizing the HKSAR government. He says it’s not a matter of patriotism or not for supporting or objecting to the implementation. It’s that the Article itself was totally against the development of a democratic place like Hong Kong and suffocated the freedom that Hong Kong people have been proud of over the decades. Like most Hong Kong citizens, Ah Chu thought that the legislation might infringe some human rights. He also worried that the legislation might introduce a mainland concept of national security into the HKSAR via the proposed power of proscribing organizations that endanger the security of the state.

From Ah Chu’s case, we can observe that he likes to discuss social and political issues and his articulation of the issues is very good. This suggested to us that we are able to locate young Hong Kong people who are devoted to social and political discussions, although they are a minority.

Ling: “It’s true that we do not talk much about social and political affairs compared with the daily stuff, like TV games, jokes, etc. among our classmates, but there’s still some though.... Usually my parents would discuss them with me during dinner time.....I would join the discussion and express my view...(why u would joined?) because I think I could know more about these through exchanging views with my parents. Sometimes, I could be so surprised that our

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<sup>24</sup> Article 23 of the Basic Law requires Hong Kong to enact laws on its own to prohibit acts including treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People’s Government, and theft of state secrets. This has become a subject of considerable controversy when the Government of the HKSAR attempted to introduce legislation to implement the Article in 2002 to 2003. After massive demonstrations on July 1, 2003, the government indefinitely withdrew its draft of the new laws.



perspective could be so different.”

Ling’s case helped us to redefine what is “big news” or “news worth discussing” among young people. She would raise those topics, which she has been discussed with her parents for discussions with her buddies. Those issues would be the news occupying the headlines of the newspapers for a few days. This meant that prolonged attention given by the public to that issue would be a measure for them to consider it as an important issue or not. In addition, Ling’s case also demonstrated an interaction between the two social groups, her parents (adult) verses Ling and that thoughts and ideas were exchanged by these interactions.

Besides, we also observed another factor for bringing them into social and political discussions – elicitation by others (parental encouragement in Ling’s case). For those not really involved in the social and political issues, we can still classify them into two categories: (1) participate when they are invited or elicited and; (2) remain silent even when they are invited or elicited.

Yan, who claimed that social and political affairs would never be a topic of discussion among classmates or friends.

Yan: “...social and politics...we don’t really get involved too often, unless we are directed to do so.”

However, she expressed that she would get involved in discussions about public affairs

when they have civil education classes or school assembly, or teachers elicit the topics and invite their participation. Though they act very distant during these discussions, sometimes they do have very lively ones, especially when the actors in the story are people they are familiar with, like Nicolas Tse.<sup>25</sup>

I tried to challenge Yan that Nicolas Tse is actually a celebrity, and she paid attention to him just because of that. But Yan argued that the reason she paid attention is because a celebrity broke the law is a social issue with several social judgment and may exert negative effect on young people.

Sam: "...well, I guess we talk about those things (social and political issues) only when there's some "big news" (What's the meaning of your "big news"?). . . . . those almost everyone talks about everywhere, TV news or newspapers reported consecutively, like Basic Law Article 23, like SARS".<sup>26</sup>

Sii: ".....but we do sometimes touch on these topics when there's some "big news". For example, the "Buy Car Incident of Antony

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<sup>25</sup> Nicolas Tse Ting-Feng, a popular Cantonese artist. Tse was arrested by the ICAC in connection with a corruption and perversion of public justice investigation. He is suspected of being involved in a conspiracy to cover up the identity of the person who wrecked his Ferrari in a traffic accident in March 23<sup>rd</sup> on the Central district's Cotton Tree Drive. The allegation is that Tse asked his assistant, Sing Kwok-Ding, to claim responsibility for the accident in his place.

<sup>26</sup> Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) is an atypical form of pneumonia that first appeared in November 2002 in Guangdong Province, China. After the outbreak in China, it spread rapidly, reaching neighboring Hong Kong and Vietnam in late February 2003. In the outbreak, SARS caused 8,069 cases of disease and 775 deaths, of which 299 cases of death were recorded in Hong Kong.



Leung”, “Five hundred thousand people march on 7.1”<sup>27</sup> and the “Basic Law Article 23”...”

Consistent with Ling, Sam and Sii both said that they would get involved in social and political discussions when somebody brings up the issues in their casual talk, like, “...do you know, Antony Leung has finally resigned?”, then they might continue the discussion on this topic and share their point of view. And sometimes, they would finally come up with a conclusion; for example, identify two groups of pros and cons on the matter. Even though these are elicited activities, they still demonstrated that the nature of their discussion is deliberatively rational.

Jia Jia: “About social and political issues, I don’t think we like to talk about them...because I assume we know little about it...just like “children pretending to be adult” if we talk politics...it’s weird...”

But JiaJia said that she reads newspapers and watches news reporting on television. Therefore, she is able to get involved in some occasional discussions elicited by friends on these topics, like Nicolas Tse’s traffic accident; Basic Law Article 23 or how awful the SAR government is.

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<sup>27</sup> 500,000 people took part in a march in Hong Kong to protest, amongst other things, against the government's handling of the plans to implement a new anti-subversion law required under Article 23 of Hong Kong's Basic Law.

Ah Lou: “We don’t talk much about social and political issues and yet we know what’s happening in society. Just because we don’t talk doesn’t mean we don’t care or are disinterested in such matters. It’s just like we are not in a position to talk about them seriously...we read, we watch and we notice things happening in society.”

“We don’t talk doesn’t mean we don’t care or we are disinterested”, “we read, we watch and we notice”. Ah Lou shows us that young people are constantly “actively receiving” social and political affairs. However, the “active participating” is probably blocked by the stereotype in Hong Kong society that “we are not in a position to talk about”.

Ah Lou: “If what we said is considered as a kind of “bullshit”, what’s the point for me to be a “fool” in front of those powerful adults? It’s better to keep quiet then...”

In short, most of them claimed that when somebody around them initiates such kind of discussions, they would take part in them. They share their thoughts if they agree or disagree on these matters and sometimes do reach a conclusion and consent. Somehow, they feel good to have a discussion freely but at the same time, they know that they are only an exchange of ideas, because their views are not going to be valued by anybody or to be promoted to the council. Some of them said that if they were told that their views were going to be evaluated or valued, then they would be more motivated to talk about



them. This showed that one of the reasons young people are not enthusiastic about social and political discussions is because their opinions are not valued by the dominant party in society. However, the category that remains completely silent is a minority indeed.

Wai: “Actually you could hardly keep a distance from it if somebody in the group is going to talk about it.”

To sum up, personal issues dominated their chitchatting and discussions while social and political affairs only contributed a small portion. Nevertheless, we can locate some young people who are very keen to engage in open and free discussions about social and political issues. They are sensitive to the social issues happening around them. Even those who classified themselves as “do not care about these issues”, admitted that when they are elicited to talk about them, they feel “okay” to be in the discussions. And, from their articulation ability over those issues, we can see that they are a group of young people that are very capable at handling the social and political discussions indeed. Despite their cognitive participation, they do unconsciously develop “spaces” in discussing social and political issues rationally, be they of local social affairs or political affairs. The conditions for their social and political discussions are probably the elicitation of peers, opinions being valued and significant events.

As previously mentioned, the youth seems to be more devoted to issues that are a “fact” rather than a “proposal”. By reviewing the topics that they have used as examples in evaluating their points, it is true that the issues about “fact” have received much more attention from them. For example, the Cargate scandal of Antony Leung, Sally Aw’s

Corruption or the March on 7.1, 2003. The only “proposal” issue that they have touched on is Basic Law Article 23. Based on this difference between a “fact” and a “proposal”, we can suggest that a “fact” is more like a “social issue” while a “proposal” is more like a “political” one. And we may see this is another dimension of “social” and “political” affairs by Hong Kong youth.

Regarding their different attitude towards “social issues” and “political issues”, Ling suggested a possible explanation to me: a proposal would be a subject on the political agenda in the Council before it can be executed as a (factual) policy and finally become a social issue. Young people might be less motivated to discuss it because of their feelings of powerlessness to influence the policy-making decision process. In contrast, they feel it’s more meaningful to comment about the “facts”, because their comments are not going to be classified as “bullshit” anyway.

## II. Performance by Frequency

In addition to the varied dimensions of their discussions, we also recorded how frequently the young people participated in these open and free discussions. From the previous survey data, we found that they generally spend more time browsing the Internet, contributing to newsgroups and chatting on the Internet than they spend on studying, which assumes to be their “necessary” daily activities. Through the interviews with some of them, we further confirmed that they enjoy spending time chatting with their friends or buddies very much.

Sii: “I enjoy so much talking and chatting with my classmates and friends. It iust like a vitamin. mv body needs it.”



friends. It just like a vitamin, my body needs it.”

BB: “Yeah, we just keep chitchatting when we stay together between classes, recesses, lunch time, after school, hanging outside in holidays, in the phone or ICQ (I seek you).”

But as to what amount of time in their chatting sessions or discussions is for social and political affairs, they admitted that the amount is quite limited comparatively speaking. I asked them to indicate the proportion of time that they spend discussing social and political issues relative to time spent on other issues they would touch on in their discussions on a scale of 100%. The highest percentage recorded was just 30% (from Ah Chu, the respondent who claimed himself very interested in social and political affairs). The majority of the rest just indicated a 10% or less than 10%.

Ah Chu was asked to explain this figure. He thought that 30% is “quite OK, because we are students after all, not politicians. I think as long as we have a few % is even ok, because it only represents the “active participation”.”

Sam: “We chat whenever we get together..... We seldom stay alone but gather as group and we form groups with similar interests like basketball, computer games..... (what of social and political issues?) Oh, honestly, comparatively less...we just need to avoid some “boys’

topics” when there are girls in the group. We try to make it more general. (How?) It will be automatically-tuned, you don’t need a conscious adjustment. (Then why there’s girls in your buddies’ group?” How do you determine who has similar interests to the members of the group that you are in?)......hnm...I don’t know...It’s very natural indeed, and I think classmates get to know each other by co-operation on projects or some class-activities and even by these discussions.” (How?) When you conduct discussions day by day, it’s easier to identify buddies that have similar interests and you will stick together afterwards.

As confirmed by Sam, similar interests do not necessarily mean the same perspectives. There are “pros” and “cons” sides in their discussions about casual or serious matters. Sam was asked to define “serious matters” and defined them as “those social and political issues”.

Although we found that the young people enjoy chitchatting or open and free discussions very much, the frequency for them to stick to the social and political topics is relatively low. Even for the interviewees that claimed themselves to be politically inclined, the percentage of these topics in their daily conversation is also not optimistic. However, Sam, who gave us a very detailed account of why they gather a lot and chat a lot, suggested to us that “social issues” are actually the “general topics” that both boys and girls can join in.



### III. Rational Discussions

According to Habermas, an ideal public sphere should be a place where people have equal rights to discuss public affairs rationally without any interference. For the multiple public sphere theory, one of the principles of a subaltern public sphere also requires the “deliberative in discourse”. In other words, discussions of social and political affairs have to be subject to the “rationality” of the discussions. To further examine the likeliness of the open and free discussions of the young people to be a subaltern public sphere, it is necessary to study whether their discussions are rational or not.

Discussions may be reasoned or unreasoned. By “reasoned” I mean discussions or expression of opinions with reasons or explanations. By “unreasoned” I mean that young people express their viewpoints unsupported by reasons. “Rationality” refers to the extent to which the messages are “reasoned”.

If the discussions are full of opinions without reasons or explanation supporting their views, the true subaltern public sphere where ideas are discussed rationally can not be realized. A number of the interviewees identified some public issues in their discussion. Therefore, they were asked to give a brief account of how they think and how the rest of their classmates in the group think on those issues.

Ah Chu: “I really do not agree that much with the performance of the present government... I don’t think it’s the appropriate act for a responsible government, nor in accordance with the spirit of the

Accountability System.”

Ah Chu has raised questions about independence in prosecution policy and the fairness of the Hong Kong legal system in Sally Aw’s Corruption and Tung’s commitment to establish an accountable government from the Cargate Scandal by Antong Leung.

Ling: “...if I am qualified to vote, I am sure I will go for it. Because I think it’s our right to choose our government, and it’s our responsibility to observe how our government behaves. I probably won’t support the officers that can’t even behave themselves...”

Ling was able to mention Dr. Hon Philip Wong Yu-hong, GBS, Legislative Councilor, who made an offensive hand gesture to the public outside the Legislative Council, which was indecent and exerted a bad influence on young people.

Sam: “Even though I am not familiar with the situation in other places around the world, I believe Hong Kong is a place where we have freedom of speech, we can express how we think about a variety of issues without any fear.”



Sam thought that setting up Basic Law Article 23 was a problem, because he considered it a threat to the freedom of speech of Hong Kong people. It is also against the wishes of Hong Kong's people to pursue a fair and democratic society.

The topics in the above narratives are some of the public issue topics most commonly mentioned by the interviewees. Their opinions are not only expressed with reasons and explanation, but we can observe that some of the reasons given are very logical and the arguments are highly organized. When I tried to compliment them on their performance, I was told "if we really have to touch on these serious topics, we must make it reasonable, otherwise, it will be challenged by someone else" (Ah Chu). "Either make it or leave it, if we are going to make it, we have to think it through carefully before expressing any ideas" (Yee). From their descriptions, rational participants is not merely Ah Chu or Yee, but also members in their group because they would raise a challenge and seek rational support for their claims during their group discussions.

They think that only through these discussions asking "why", can the truth be disclosed. "If we talk more and discuss more, then we can listen more and know more" (Sii). They said that sometimes these reasoned discussions might proceed to further discussions, and sometimes they might not. However, they always benefited from knowing the point of view of their friends.

Sam: "You have asked how we decided who have similar interests to us, it's these discussions let us learn more about our friends and classmates ....."

Jia Jia: “We may not agree with the viewpoint of our classmates or friends, but when I hear some ideas which are different from mine, I will think “oh, actually we can think from this angle! And I believe that’s the way I benefit.”

We therefore know that young people formed their circle or sphere when they discovered their buddies around have similar topics of discussions. During their discussions about social and political affairs, they accept that their group members hold different views and do not think it’s necessary for them to reach a final conclusion on every discussion. This can be another way of experiencing the spirit of freedom of speech and freedom of expression, which a democratic society should contain.

For sure, there are some young people who are not capable of making too critical an argument. Like Emy said, “sometimes our position is not stable enough, I can easily be convinced, maybe that’s because we are young people after all, and that’s probably the reason why adults don’t value our opinions on the public issues.” However, I suggested we should accept the stratified nature of every social group in reality. There are always elites and ordinaries in a social group. By the same token, we have to believe there are some smart young people in the youth group who are capable of making deliberative discourses

It seems that the Hong Kong’s young people are equipped with a sense of questioning towards issues that they are not familiar with. We believe this attitude is a necessary condition for rational discussions to be formed according to the criteria we set for



rationality, hence, most of their discussions tended to be rational and deliberative.

#### IV. Possible Arena of Discussions

The young people enjoy chatting with friends and sometimes do get involved in open discussion of public issues, however, where are they going to conduct these activities and hence where is the possible birthplace of a subaltern public sphere?

Sii: “I think I have already got used to having my friends around .....

And I love so much chatting with them during school.”

They expressed that they usually talk casually as well as having open and free discussions at school. These might occur in the classroom, or the canteen or just in a corner of the playground. Anywhere that is suitable for a group or a few of them to gather together. If they are on holiday, a few of them said they would hang out at a movie or do some shopping together, and the chitchat is more often casual talk, more serious discussion topics would be those happening at school.

No matter what issues they talk about or discuss, staying together and sharing views is the way they most enjoy expressing their feeling over the matters. They prefer an “interacting space” where they can have immediate response and interaction with others, or buddies with similar interests so that they can easily start any chitchats or discussions. But it’s not a necessity for a group to hold consistent points of view for a discussion. And there is no doubt that school is their first priority for gathering and the birthplace for such open discussions.

In order to check whether there is any unconscious self-censorship of the topics they discuss and the place they hold their discussions, they were asked if there are any topics where they need to care about the arena for discussions. Most of them found my question very unbelievable, and their response was that it's not a question they had ever thought of. A few of them said, "Of course we won't let the discussions continue if the actor or actress of the story is present while we are gossiping about them." As previously mentioned, the atmosphere also plays a role, so that they won't discuss social and political issues in their shopping time. But we considered it's the matter of timing but not the place at all. So without self-censorship, the interference of government or school might not be a factor affecting their social and political discussion.

As we previously recorded, the young people of Hong Kong are an Internet-dependent group. They spend much of their time on the Internet for various purposes but mostly for communication with others. With the Internet's properties of easily recognizing affiliates, the forming of newsgroups among net-mates with similar interests, the diversified topics that can be discussed without the fear of discouragement or intervention, it may be an ideal place for a subaltern public sphere for the youth of Hong Kong. If this is the case, then the Internet could realize its potential to be a subaltern public sphere and turn people away from the traditional media channels like radio, newspapers or magazines.

Based on this assumption, we inquired with the young people in the interviews whether they have adopted the Internet as a place for their open discussions. One study (Thompson, 1995) did suggest that with the development of media, public discussions are no longer linked to the "sharing of common locale" for face-to-face interaction. Nevertheless, their responses do not follow this argument. They claimed that, most of



the time, if they are allowed to, they prefer open discussions to be held by face-to-face interaction. They enjoy the face-to-face communication context, the real-world setting, and having the immediate response of the other parties. "Using ICQ or newsgroups is not always our first priority for communication, but only if we are restricted from meeting face-to-face" (Kenneth). The reason they gave was mainly due to the solidarity feeling that first person communication gives them. "We would never know who is going to disappear from the discussion the next second" (Kenneth). Or it's their pursuit of rationality driving them, "its sometimes kind of stupid to have discussions in ways like "I agree" and "I don't agree" without any reasons" (Ah Chu).

To summarise, despite its potential to be a subaltern public sphere, use of the Internet is as not popular as face-to-face communication among the young people. They prefer the immediate response of their affiliates and they enjoy the co-spaces that they share during face-to-face communication. This also echoed our previous findings that they prefer discursive-oriented means to action-oriented means in taking political actions; among the discursive-oriented means, they agree the most with "open debate" and "open statement". No matter on what issues they are going to conduct a discussion, school is always their first choice. This suggests the likeliness that a subaltern public sphere for the youth of Hong Kong is to be found in the schools.

## Chapter 5 Discussions and Conclusions

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This thesis comprises by a contradicting phenomenon among the Hong Kong youth – the political passive image casts on them and the observable social and political participation. In order to disclose the real situation, whether the Hong Kong youth are a political passive group, we tried to investigate if they have any kind of social and political participation. As most of the young people are students, the way of their social and political participation might not be in a comprehensive sense as the politicians or adult-like. In light of this, we specifically look at their social and political discussions as the way they participated in social and political participation.

Social and political participation is proven to be one of the active senses of social and political participation by Habermas's public sphere theory. We borrowed his concept of public sphere to evaluate Hong Kong youth's social and political participation. However, I considered that Habermas' public sphere theory is not sensitive enough for analyzing the "youth group", which is a social stratified social status, thus subaltern public sphere was used as the theoretical framework for this thesis.

By matching the characteristics of the observable social and political discussions of the Hong Kong youth with subaltern public sphere, we hope to investigate the possible existence of a subaltern public sphere of Hong Kong youth.

### **Social and Political Discussions Found**

Through the in-depth interviews complemented with the survey data, we observe the presence of Hong Kong youth's open, free discussions over social and political affairs.



They have cognitively expressed attitude over the national affairs and Hong Kong educational reform; they are a discursive-oriented group that agrees with the political actions happen in form of open debate and open statement. They are able to generate their daily political discourses in a rational manner. Their discussions are generally taking place in the form of face-to-face interactions and the most popular location for such discussions is at school. However, the social and political discussions are mostly an elicited one.

### **The Possible Arena of Subaltern Public Sphere**

Nowadays, young people in Hong Kong are highly exposed to mass media. Mass media provides a crucial arena for the dominant public sphere in executing open debates. Because of youth's adaptability to mass media and the traditional heavy reliance on mass media by the public sphere, we also expected that mass media would provide a possible birthplace for the subaltern public sphere of Hong Kong's youth. However, we found that young people's reliance on mass media functions only on the level of information seeking, not as an institution for conducting political discussions. As recalled from the interviews, they picked up "big news" which was repeatedly reported by the mass media for their discussions, or they treated the mass media as an information provider for deliberative discussions. Almost all of their discussions, finally, take place in face-to-face communications among themselves.

Again, we might explain this phenomenon with another cause of the decline of bourgeois public sphere - commercialization dominance. In the eighteenth century in Britain with the expanding capitalist society, large commercial organizations played the central role in managing the bourgeois public sphere that was only a joint consumption rather than a more active participation in mutual critique. These large-scale commercial

concerns altered the characteristics of the public sphere fundamentally in that the forum of rational critical debate becomes just a domain of the cultural consumption which the powerful, the leaders and parties aim for. With some forms of technical aid, media as the most common type of institution at that time. While capitalism continued to expand, the media were in the hands of those with money and power, and commercial interests dominated people's daily activities.

No matter today or in the eighteenth century, the mass media are owned by rich and powerful people. With the dominance of their commercial interests, the youth group in Hong Kong, being classified as a subaltern group in the socio-economic status with little resources, for sure would not receive much attention from the mass media. Therefore, the space for open debate available to the youth from mass media is limited. Due to this limitation of its survival, the subaltern public sphere of Hong Kong youth is then found to be located at school. However, schools can only act as a safe discursive space for the build-up of political discourses because they are free from commercial dominance. They cannot be treated as an institution for the youth's subaltern public sphere, though, because the youth is only "borrowing" the school as a physical arena for the formation of political discourses, but without gaining control over them.

### **Domination within a Subaltern Public Sphere**

The ideal practice of a subaltern public sphere should be the same as the public sphere in the ways that it is free from any forms of domination and avoids inequalities. Therefore, besides the technical measurement of a subaltern public sphere, we also recorded interviewees' demographic information. We tried to investigate whether gender, age or the interviewee's family income would contribute any forms of domination within the subaltern public sphere.



Generally speaking, domination was not found either due to gender difference, age or family income. The self-claimed politically inclined interviewees did not necessarily come from a rich family or an older age-group. Gender was also not a significant factor. The “activists” were just those with an interest in social and political affairs or having a stronger sense of belonging to Hong Kong’s society.

The lack of domination within the subaltern public sphere might be due to the absence of conflict of interests. Due to the socio-economic status of young people, they are not yet subject to the competition for limited resources and commercial interests, which happens in the dominant public sphere. In the light of this, the subaltern public sphere could gain an advantage in its stable development without the threat of self-disintegration like the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere. In addition, being part of the multiple public sphere system, its stability can also facilitate the growth of the public sphere.

### **Co-existence of Dominant and Subaltern Public Sphere**

A good functioned public sphere, according to Habermas, should allow all social members’ access. Hong Kong proclaimed to have a very well developed (dominant) public sphere where Hong Kong people can fully utilize, however, the voices of Hong Kong youth could not be found yet. As the questions we raised, the absence of Hong Kong youth’s voice is due to a “real absence” or is it because of the voice of Hong Kong youth is not located in the dominant public sphere? From the in-depth interviews, we observed the presence of social and political discussion of Hong Kong youth, though it is not in vast amount.

Due to this contradiction, we believe there are some problems to do with the dominant

public sphere in Hong Kong. According to Ho (2001), Hong Kong has an adult-centered political system; the opinions and ideas of its young people are classified by the adults as belonging in the non-mainstream category. This means that the voices of young people have been devalued and excluded. The dominant public sphere still adheres to some norms of a public sphere, however, the principles of universal access and the discourse of seeking common goods have already been violated.

The restricted access has caused the historical decline of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere in 18th century. The bourgeois public sphere was based on the principle of universal access; however, it was restricted to those individuals who had the education and the financial means. They are usually members of the elite and professionals, and ordinary people like workers, peasants and women are normally excluded. In order to avoid Hong Kong's public sphere to decline as Habermasian one, we try to seek ways for the existence of Hong Kong youth's voice.

The youth group is an educated group, however, with its limited resources and its fundamental subaltern position in society, it is excluded from the dominant public sphere. If young people are excluded from the dominant sphere, then their daily political discourses might only seek survival in the form of a subaltern public sphere. In other words, the formation of a subaltern public sphere of Hong Kong's youth is mainly due to the exclusion of their opinions and participation by the dominant public sphere.

### **Interactions with the Wider Publics**

We have come across the possibility of the co-existence of the dominant public sphere and the subaltern public sphere, but the ultimate goal of these two levels of public sphere is to realize the democracy of a place by constant and deliberative dialogue



between them. This is indeed a dilemma. In the very first place, the subaltern public sphere is found to exist because of the dominant public sphere's inability to hold their opinions. They have a sort of incompatible relationship, if not an opposing one. In light of this, dialogue between them is somewhat difficult, if not impossible. Besides, as we have located schools as the arena of Hong Kong youth's subaltern public sphere, they present rather limited space for interactions between other subaltern spheres, never mind the dominant one. For instance, spontaneous interactions of students from school to school are still doubtful. This also explains the failure of Hong Kong youth's subaltern public sphere in achieving the function of mobilizing potential subaltern group members.

In order to promote dialogue between these two levels of the public sphere, improving the status of the subaltern public sphere might be one of the possible ways. This can be realized by recognizing the existence of the youth subaltern public sphere, by providing more "spaces" for its survival like setting-up youth forums or youth channels and by preventing any intervention by the government or commercial parties. These are possible because the subaltern public sphere of the youth group is not in a conflict relationship with the dominant public sphere, as others. Some subaltern public spheres have to exist in opposing relationships with the dominant public sphere. If this opposition disappears, these spheres are no longer subaltern and are assimilated by the dominant public. However, because of the uniqueness of the nature of the "youth group", which is a systematic social hierarchy, this co-opt is then possible.

### **Contributing the Democratic Development of HK**

The social and political discussions of Hong Kong youth have demonstrated several functions that an ideal public sphere should have. For instance, it is capable of

providing a safe discursive space for the build-up of discourses; it helps in clarifying the youth's interests, and also helps in constructing the identity of group members. Although it still has a lot to do before achieving the goal of mobilizing the potential of subaltern group members, expanding outward and influencing the wider public and finally promoting the health of the public sphere, the likeliness of generating a subaltern public sphere from the youth's social and political discussions would finally contribute to the democratic development of Hong Kong.

The "youth group" is actually a transformable classification. Young people are classified as "youth group" and entered into the subaltern public sphere because of their age limitation. However, when a young person grows up, he or she will eventually detach from the "youth group" or the subaltern public sphere and enter into the dominant public. In light of this, promoting the subaltern public sphere could enrich the democratic potentials of Hong Kong's youth who will become members of the elite and professionals in the dominant public sphere in the future. This could finally promote the health of the public sphere in Hong Kong.

### **Broadening the Definition of "Subaltern"**

We stated at the very beginning that Hong Kong does have a well-developed public sphere. Therefore, what grounds are there for the existence of a subaltern public sphere for Hong Kong youth? Theoretically speaking, the generation of the subaltern public sphere theory is definitely due to the incompleteness or flaw in the public sphere theory. Because it fails to bracket social inequalities, full accessibility is not realized. This leads to an operational defect that members of subordinated groups have no means of entering the deliberative discourse and finally causes obliteration of the voices of the subordinated groups.



Studies about the political participation of Hong Kong's youth have often reached a pessimistic conclusion. If following the line of thought of subaltern public sphere theory, the perceived apolitical image of Hong Kong's youth is probably due to the failure in identifying the youth group as a subaltern group in the social system. Therefore, this study re-examines the existence of their social and political discussions and its likeliness to generate a public sphere of the Hong Kong youth with the framework of subaltern public sphere theory. The positive result of this study suggests to us that the public sphere operated in Hong Kong is fallen into the deficiency of Habermas' public sphere theory – social inequalities cannot be eliminated and this leads to exclusion of the youth group from participating in the (dominant) public sphere.

We could claim that the existence of a subaltern public sphere among Hong Kong's youth is due to the adhesion of its characteristics to the subaltern public sphere theory. However, there is a fundamental difference underlying it that makes the subaltern public sphere of Hong Kong's youth different from the original one.

Studies of the subaltern public sphere are restricted to the oppressed groups in society. According to this classification, people can never escape from their destined social group. For example, a baby girl is born to be a woman, and she is going to stay in the women's subaltern public sphere for her whole life. However, that is not the case for the youth group. Regarding the "transformable" nature of the youth group mentioned above, a young man or woman will leave the subaltern public over time. Therefore, this "subaltern" relationship is detachable with "time" as a factor. On the other hand, because of constant replacement of the youth population, this youth group will not disappear even though there is a constant detachment of young people from this social status. As long as they maintain the characteristic of a subaltern public sphere, it is still

a subaltern public sphere for the youth.

Therefore, this study has successfully introduced that “youth” should be classified as one of the subaltern public spheres. This extension of the “subaltern” group could enrich the definition of the “subaltern public” and hence empower the theory in better identifying and analyzing the oppressed groups in society.

### **Summary**

Hong Kong’s youth has always been perceived as an apolitical group. In order to revise the perceived apolitical image of Hong Kong’s youth, this study examined the possible existence of daily, open, free social and political discussions among them. By comparing the characteristics of these open discussions with the defined subaltern public sphere, we are able to examine if these discussions could be considered as a subaltern public sphere of the youth group in the context of Hong Kong.

Throughout this study, we identified that the youth group itself possesses an ultimately subordinated or oppressed social status in which it has limited power and resources in respect of the dominant social group. The results of this study showed that the young people in Hong Kong hold open, free discussions about a variety of issues, including the central issues of a subaltern public sphere - social and political affairs. Although the frequency of their discussions is not very significant while other characteristics fit well with the characteristics of a subaltern public sphere. For the free-entrance of discussions, they were exerted with no interference from the outside parties or government. For the discourse deliberativeness, the interviewees have demonstrated a high degree of deliberation in articulating public affairs. Their knowledgeable mentality showed, and the way they are using the mass media as an information-seeking platform convinced us,



that their daily political discourses are not just casual talk. Yet these social and political discussions are not held with significant amount and the location are limited in the schools, we have to conclude that an ideal subaltern public sphere of Hong Kong youth is not likely to be found but it's potential of development is optimistic.

We very often say that “Young people are the masters of Hong Kong’s future”, so it is ironic that our society tends to ignore their voices. It is true that the mental development and life experience of young people are not as mature as those of adults, but this may have prevented their entering the social and political world because the dominant public will never treat their opinions and voices as practical means for execution. Unfortunately, when young people discover their powerlessness to enter the political discourse, they stay further away from these arenas.

Whether Hong Kong is a democratic society is beyond the scope of this study. However, developing the democratic values of its citizens is definitely an important leap towards building a better Hong Kong. In order to promote democracy in Hong Kong, we should encourage the development of Hong Kong youth’s subaltern public sphere as well as the dialogue between the wider public and the various subaltern spheres in the social system. This can be achieved by promoting the states of the subaltern public sphere for Hong Kong’s youth by means of setting up more youth forums and supporting their daily political discourses. This would allow government officials, policy-makers and other related parties, as well as the public, to keep abreast of young people’s opinions and views, which can assist in the formulation of youth policies and in the planning of youth services.

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